

Rethinking Foreign Language Proficiency

(What the 'new' Irish can offer us)

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Given the extent to which Ireland's prosperity depends on our capacity to sell products and services in the global marketplace, it is hardly surprising that foreign language skills are in high demand in the employment market. In fact, these language skills are as critical to indigenous businesses as they are to multinationals because, if a firm wants to do business off-shore, it often needs to be able to communicate fluently with customers and prospective customers in their own language.

Up till now, Ireland has been fortunate in that we speak English, as it is the common means of communication for speakers of many different first languages across the globe. But, as the balance of economic power moves East and South, the relative importance of English to our future is on the wane.

Today Ireland needs fluent speakers of virtually every international language if it wants to guarantee its prosperity and social cohesion, both of which inevitably depend on economic growth. The problem is that our schools have tended

to concentrate on teaching French and German and, to a much lesser extent, Spanish. In any case, language teaching in our schools has tended to have a written rather than an oral focus, so a young person with a good Leaving Certificate result in one of these languages is often not well equipped to communicate fluently in them.

There is the further consideration that producing workers with the capacity to speak fluently with non-English speakers in their own language has a significant lead-in time – a minimum of four years, assuming that those who commence the training programmes have the necessary aptitude and commitment. As well, there is the need to produce cohorts of workers fluent in a very wide range of languages and, ideally, each language cohort would need to comprehend persons from a range of disciplines – business, engineering, science, and so on. For example, if we really want to engage with the Chinese around electronic engineering, we need electronic engineers who speak fluent Chinese. In this context, someone with even an A in Higher level Chinese in the

Leaving Certificate (if we had got to that point in embedding Chinese in the school curriculum) would be of little use. So, what, if anything, can be done to rectify matters?

For a start, we need to be realistic. There is little point in the finger-wagging behaviour that so many commentators engaged in last year when PayPal, the global online payments firm, announced that it would have to 'import' 500 employees from abroad in order to staff its new customer support office in Dundalk. The PayPal operation will require workers fluent in up to twenty languages and it is unrealistic to think that we could offer a school curriculum that could go anywhere near meeting this kind of demand for business fluency in foreign languages. We also need to acknowledge that many jobs that PayPal have on offer are, as Richard Eardley (the managing Director of Hayes Ireland) recently pointed out in an article in the Irish Examiner, essentially entry level roles, and people working in them tend to move employment after a short time.

While a basic capacity to communicate in a foreign language will be beneficial in many work situations, we ultimately require significant numbers who speak these world languages with absolute fluency – irrespective of whether they are working in what might be termed

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call or support centres, or engaging with foreign language speaking professionals either at home or abroad. It would certainly be good if the PayPal’s of this world could employ mainly Irish residents, but this will not be possible unless we radically rethink how we produce sufficient numbers of workers with the requisite language skills. This rethink will not come from beating ourselves up about why we are not achieving the impossible.

An examination of the 2011 census figures shows that there are significant numbers of persons currently resident in Ireland who are fluent in many of the languages that we need in order to build economic prosperity by doing business in a globalised world. Table 1 details the numbers of Irish residents, broken down by age group, who speak English with a good level of proficiency as well as being native speakers of a number of key languages that might be relevant to Ireland’s economic development. It is possible to obtain similar statistics for virtually every world language from the 2011 CSO census. Interestingly, the 2011 census figures show that more than half a million (514,068) Irish residents live in homes where English is not the first language.

The benefit of teaching foreign languages to young Irish people who come from homes where English or Irish is the first language is widely acknowledged. On the other hand, the advantage to be gained from assisting young people

who already speak a language other than English in the home to acquire full written fluency in their heritage languages has been, to a significant degree, unrecognised by the education sector, the State or the media.

A number of national groups, in particular the Polish, make valiant efforts to ensure that their young people acquire written fluency in their heritage language; but they get little, if any, support or encouragement to do so. Even gaining access to school buildings for their weekly classes can be problematic. The prevailing view seems to be that, while such classes are in the interest of families likely to return to their countries of origin, they are of little benefit to Ireland. True, it is important that the offspring of immigrants from non-English-

speaking countries develop excellent literacy skills in their heritage tongue so that they are not disadvantaged in the event of the family returning home. On that basis alone, Ireland, given its history of emigration should make it as easy as possible for those children to develop their heritage language competence. And, as a former emigrant, I can attest to the extent that the vast majority of migrants cling to the idea of returning to their homeland one day – even if that dream only becomes a reality for some.

But it is not only the ‘newcomers’ that can gain from such an approach; the Irish economy has even more to gain. Those young people coming from non-English speaking homes can become one of our greatest assets. If we assist them to acquire native-speaker standard competence in their heritage languages, we will be going a significant way to meeting our need for workers fluent in both English and a foreign language.



It should ensure that not only will we have workers to take up the entry level jobs in call and support centres, but we should also have highly qualified professionals, across the disciplines, who can communicate confidently with their professional colleagues all around the globe, but especially in Europe and the BRIC countries.

These bilingual and, in a sense, bicultural workers, will have a significant advantage over what we might term native Irish workers who are bilingual. They will have roots in their families' country of origin, and these roots have the potential to provide business, cultural, and even political connections that would take the 'non-native' a long time to develop.

In 2012, Ireland had thousands of young people taking a foreign language in the Leaving Certificate: French (25,977), German (6,787), Spanish (4,330), Italian (384), Portuguese (63), Dutch (20), Russian (269), Czech (14), Polish (794), Latvian (87), Lithuanian (262), Hungarian (33), Romanian (109), Japanese (239) and Arabic (149)¹.

These statistics however, are to some extent misleading for a number of reasons. Firstly, the focus of many students in taking French, German and Spanish is to satisfy the requirement for entry to university rather than the acquisition of a linguistic competence. This is borne out to some extent by the relatively high percentage of students who sit the ordinary level paper in French (47%), German (36%) and Spanish (42%)². Ordinary level language

competence is not a good basis for becoming proficient in a language, if one has studied it for five years.

Secondly, it is not even the Leaving Certificate Higher level standard that our workers require, but native speaker proficiency. And, of course, this is the standard possessed by those who come from homes where English is the second language.

Thirdly, it is not just three or four languages that we need proficiency in, but 30 languages. Admittedly, the numbers that need to be proficient in any particular language depends on the relative economic importance of that language to us economically. For example, we need many more proficient in BRIC country languages than we need proficient in Dutch or Swedish, where English is widely spoken.

As mentioned above, some national groups, such as the Polish, make a very big effort to ensure that their young develop proficiency in their heritage language, but the Polish and other national groups need our assistance if they are to ensure that their offspring develop native-speaker standard written and oral language proficiency, to their benefit and to Ireland's.

The support that these national groups require has a number of dimensions. In the first instance, they need access to suitable buildings, free of charge, to accommodate their language classes. Ideally, our school buildings should be made available for such purposes and if there is a cost associated with this, it is in the interest of the State

to bear this cost. It should not be a matter of national groups having to beg for teaching facilities; instead, the schools system needs to be proactive in making them available.

The mere availability of facilities for extracurricular classes, however, can only achieve so much. We need to look at ways in which the teaching of heritage languages can be integrated into the school curriculum from Infants through to Leaving Certificate. Given that the number of students with any heritage language background in any school is going to be relatively small, it will require real proactivity and creative thinking to achieve this.

What might be done? Could the NCCA, working in collaboration with the departments of education in Poland, Lithuania, India, China, Portugal, and so on, through their national embassies and consulates, develop a comprehensive language curriculum, from Infants to Leaving Certificate, in these heritage languages? Certainly, anyone who attended the annual conference of the network of Polish schools in Ireland, at UCD last November, could see the willingness of the Polish Embassy to assist with programmes aimed at developing the Polish language skills of first generation Irish coming from Polish backgrounds.

It is not just curricula that would need to be developed; we would need to develop a full suite of e-teaching and e-learning programmes, from Infants to Leaving Certificate, capable of being delivered over the Internet. Within the next 18 months, most first and second level schools will have access to 100-megabit broadband. The heritage language learners would merely need access to a computer and a set of headphones. This way, primary school students could devote a period of time

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¹ See <http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=st&sc=r12>

² <http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=st&sc=r12>

each day to learning their heritage language, without interfering with the learning of their classmates. At second level, it should also be possible to accommodate the learning of heritage languages, though doing so may present some added challenges.

Given that the aim is to develop native speaker proficiency, the language curricula would need to be aligned with the language curricula that apply in, for example, Poland or Lithuania. Similarly, examinations and accreditation would need to be set explicitly at this level. In this regard, could students taking Polish, for example, sit the Matura in Polish rather than the Leaving Certificate examination? To incentivise these students to achieve a high standard in their heritage languages, might we consider giving bonus CAO points for results in, say, the Polish Matura?

Would the availability of high quality distance learning programmes in heritage languages encourage other students, from 'native Irish' backgrounds, to take up some of these languages? Might we consider identifying students with a particular aptitude for learning languages and point them in the direction of these programmes? Could third level

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colleges make provision for students in any discipline, to take on a heritage language as an optional part of their academic programme? The curricula developed for school students could be extended or adapted to meet the needs of third level students, depending on their prior knowledge of the language.

One thing seems relatively obvious, the efforts of our education system to date leave a lot to be desired when it comes to developing significant numbers of workers with the capacity to speak even French, German or Spanish – not to mind the array of heritage languages that we need to master. Also, recent initiatives to introduce Chinese in both Transition Year and the new Junior Cycle, while welcome, are unlikely to contribute, in the medium term, to generating a

cohort with proficiency in Chinese.

We need to adopt more radical approaches. The arguments set out in this piece are intended to catalyse some radical thinking in this area. As W L Bateman noted: "If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you've always got."

We live in a globalised world, where our products can be sold in literally every corner of the earth. Likewise, we can attract visitors and students from all around the globe. The key to doing this however, is the extent to which we develop the capacity to communicate proficiently in foreign languages. Our historical dependence on trade and tourism with the English-speaking world has left many of us convinced that, because, we speak English, we don't really need to worry about other languages. If we are to guarantee our future prosperity and cohesion, we will have to disabuse ourselves of this view, and do something effective to ensure that we can communicate with the people of the globe in their own languages.

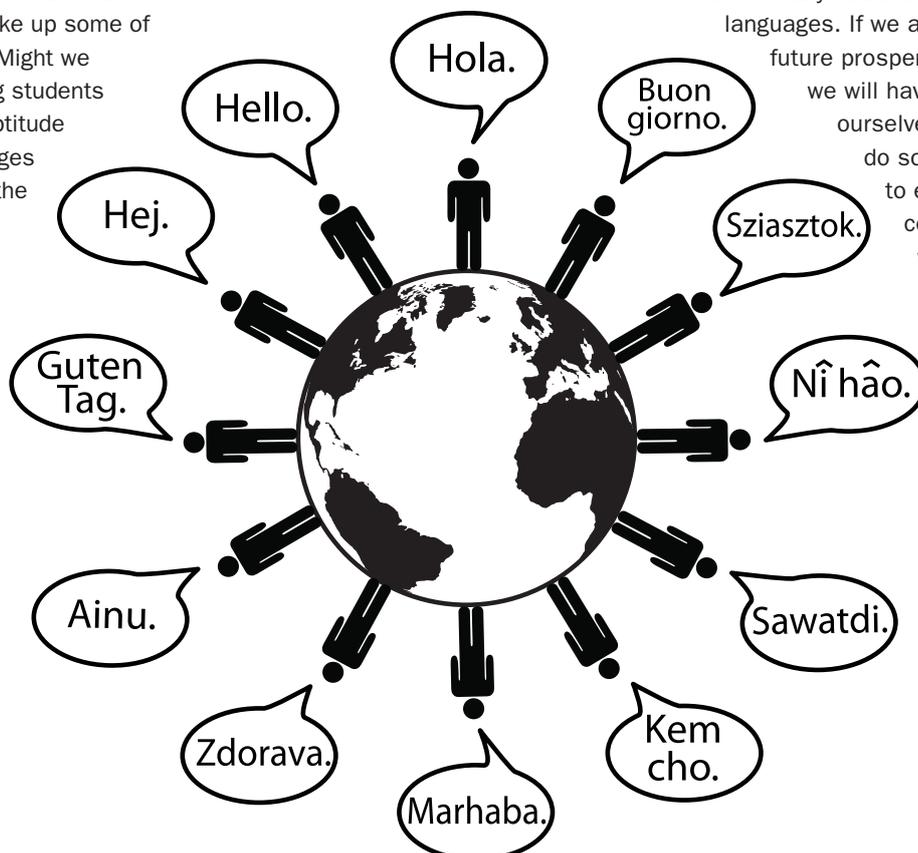


Table 1

Persons usually resident in the State who speak a Language other than English or Irish at home – classified by age group, place of birth, language and how well English is spoken³.

Language spoken at home	Total	English Spoken		English Spoken (0 to 4 years)			English Spoken (5 to 12 years)			English Spoken (13 to 18 years)		
		Very Well	Well	Total	Very Well	Well	Total	Very Well	Well	Total	Very Well	Well
German	27,342	19,923	4,773	1,056	535	239	1,975	1,620	231	5,232	3,606	1,041
Yoruba	10,093	8,374	1,171	440	237	115	2,170	1,774	200	924	800	77
French	37,800	26,640	5,322	1,769	818	488	3,372	2,551	418	11,046	7,305	2,136
Italian	3,624	2,866	409	466	227	105	524	440	50	279	210	43
Dutch	3,522	2,868	554	56	18	15	236	189	43	179	153	22
Russian	18,850	6,612	7,491	201	25	42	1,187	729	342	1,046	809	199
Rumanian	16,613	5,785	7,196	187	17	30	1,044	637	262	101	752	240
Arabic	8,958	4,201	3,310	212	18	47	822	496	204	732	548	142
Turkish	1,180	656	371	14	4	4	66	47	17	58	46	9
Urdu	6,726	3,784	2,230	87	20	27	598	441	118	562	462	81
Vietnamese	705	149	224	14	7	3	22	11	9	37	18	15
Chinese	12,503	3,318	5,677	42	9	13	202	99	72	402	191	165
Japan	837	435	277	31	12	7	76	53	15	46	34	9
Portuguese	11,902	4,864	4,205	628	174	147	1,028	699	221	688	429	166
Spanish	21,640	14,981	4,313	1,170	515	295	1,846	1,472	209	3,226	2,139	679
Lithuanian	31,635	8,731	12,422	2,449	239	384	3,412	1,995	1,035	1,884	1,311	471
Polish	119,526	33,811	49,322	10,451	847	1,446	10,527	5,292	3,646	4,834	3,261	1,284

³ The data included in this table is extracted from Table CDD46 of the Census 2011 reports – see <http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=CDD46&PLanguage=0>