

Opinions

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Languages Connect 2017-2026 Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education: a View from Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland

by [Sharon Jones](#)

In this article, Sharon Jones, Senior Lecturer in Education Studies with Modern Languages and International Placement Coordinator at Stranmillis University College in Belfast reviews Ireland's Languages Connect strategy in light of Initial Teacher Education and current foreign language learning policy across the border in Northern Ireland.

Context: What's in a name?

Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages, *Languages Connect*, is apposite and timely. The landscape that is language learning is crying out to be connected, by bridging gaps between regions, sectors, disciplines, educational phases and disparate levels of opportunity. Too many eyes, minds and lives remain closed to its benefits.

The immediate policy context of *Languages Connect* is the Action Plan for Education 2016–19 that seeks to 'enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages' (2017: 6). *Languages Connect* builds on earlier literacy and Irish language initiatives in Ireland, and cites the IMD (*Institute for Management Development*) *World Talent Ranking 2017* that placed Ireland at number 44 in terms of language skills, a few places above the UK at number 48. The Strategy outlines four goals relating to learning and the learning environment; immigrant linguistic communities; profiling of language learning; and the economy. It includes targets and benchmarking of skills by European linguistic standards, and promises in its wake the inauguration of a Foreign Languages Advisory Group and a formal review in 2022.

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A View from the North

These reflections emerge from my experience as a linguist, lecturer and International Placement Coordinator in one of Northern Ireland's Initial Teacher Education institutions. Northern Ireland is a constitutional part of the United Kingdom with a close relationship to the Republic. Regarding language education and policy, and languages in the community, there are similarities and distinctions between the two regions. Perhaps the most obvious similarity is reflected in the IMD World Talent Rankings 2017: across the island of Ireland there is significant scope for development in producing successful linguists. In Northern Ireland, the Languages for the Future Strategy (DE 2012: 1) had already made this clear: if we wish to be outward looking, engaging meaningfully in a globalised world, 'we need to think long and hard about the sort of languages we teach, who we teach them to, and how we teach them'.

The iteration of such concerns in Language Connect and the efforts it makes to redress the imbalance between public awareness of the importance of languages and STEM subjects, for example, are to be welcomed. Likewise, the commitment of the Irish government to invest in teacher development in languages, through Initial Teacher Education, Continuing Professional Development and research, is admirable. The focus on learning in Languages Connect, especially Content and Language Integrated Learning, is helpful. The potential of CLIL and cross-curricular approaches to language learning was highlighted recently in the Review of Current Primary Languages in Northern Ireland (Jones et al. 2017).

The Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007) is now over ten years old and is surely due for review. It is my hope that the consideration of additional languages with respect to primary curriculum review in Ireland mentioned in Languages Connect will be reflected in the North. Unlike other regions of the United Kingdom, learning an additional language in primary school, although encouraged, is not yet statutory. Many children miss out. Moreover, the emphasis on English–Irish bilingualism in the primary school reflected in Languages Connect does not carry easily into the context of Northern Ireland. According to current Department of Education statistics, the number of children in Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland, although growing, is small, and Irish English bilingualism in schools generally is limited. Irish is of great importance in light of Northern Ireland's shared heritage, but learning Irish in isolation from other world languages in primary school could represent a shortcoming as far as engagement with the world beyond Ireland is concerned. The Review of Current Primary Languages in Northern Ireland (Jones et al. 2017) found that children in Northern Ireland would like to learn languages such as French and Spanish. Therefore I would argue that Northern Ireland should look to Scotland's Language Learning in Scotland: a 1+2 Approach with its aim to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn an additional language from Primary 1 onwards, and a further language from Primary 5 (Scottish Government 2012).

If Irish–English bilingualism is limited in schools in Northern Ireland, multilingual environments are fast becoming a reality. According to current Department of Education data, in 2017/18 there are approximately 90 first languages spoken by pupils in Northern Ireland's schools and approximately 15,400 newcomer pupils, accounting for 4.5% of the school population. The question of mother tongue support raised in Languages Connect is thus very pertinent. There is a need in Northern Ireland for policy makers and practitioners to engage with research to understand how best to shape educational provision. There is a strong rationale for further funded research specific to language policy and provision in education, and the needs of Northern Ireland's increasingly diverse linguistic communities. The Key Inequalities in Education Draft Statement (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2015) identified newcomer pupils as a group at risk of educational underachievement.

Students enrolled in the four-year Bachelor of Education (primary) programmes in the two ITE colleges in Northern Ireland include a number of talented linguists who, in addition to achieving very good grades at A-level, may choose to study abroad to develop their language skills. The Bachelor of Education degree provides opportunities across significant phases of school experience for the

development of expertise in the art of teaching in the primary school. This combination of linguistic and pedagogical skills in graduate teachers is important if languages are to be taught successfully in the primary school context. Such a route is preferable, arguably, to peripatetic models, alluded to in Languages Connect.

In terms of talent development, Languages Connect makes a very important point:

...given that about 70% of our school leavers attain some competence in at least one foreign language, it is highly desirable that we capitalise on this attainment and encourage students at third level to maintain and improve on their language skills. This Strategy aims to increase significantly the number of students in HE studying courses with a language component, in order to provide the education system and industry with sufficient numbers.

A recent analysis of enrolment figures in the Bachelor of Education programme in my own college shows that the percentage of students with a qualification in a modern language at GCE AS or A2 level has been increasing year on year, with an overall increase of 5% over the last three years. Currently 15% of students enrolled on the Bachelor of Education degree have at least one language qualification at AS or A2 level. This suggests that the talent pool in primary Initial Teacher Education should not be neglected as we seek to develop capacity to address the languages deficit. Languages Connect notes that in the Republic of Ireland there are too few students taking up mobility opportunities such as Erasmus Plus to experience language immersion as part of their studies. Although, fortunately, this is not reflected in my context in Initial Teacher Education (primary) in Northern Ireland, in order to build positively in the face of the complexities of Brexit, the continuation of Erasmus Plus funding or an equivalent scheme will be imperative.

Building for the future

There is much in *Languages Connect* to hearten and inspire as we work together to promote the development of language skills. Most encouraging perhaps is the level of commitment and leadership demonstrated by the Irish government. It is my hope that this will be reflected in Northern Ireland also.

Further Reading

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