Virtual Space for Language Learning in the Institute of Technology Sector

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Abstract

Some years ago, scholars called upon Irish Higher Education Institutions to rethink the positioning of languages in their curricula, nonetheless, today, with a substantial skills shortage in language graduates, and the challenges created by Brexit, this sea change has not taken place. More recently, the government's *Languages Connect Strategy 2017-26* has set an ambitious target for increasing the numbers of students learning modern languages at higher level institutions in Ireland. The goal is to broaden language provision to 20% of the entire student population. This represents a major challenge for policy makers in the IoT sector. Meanwhile, a nationwide investigation of the sector has revealed that there is a disconnect between grassroots demand for language provision and current institutional practices. This multimethod study collected quantitative and qualitative data from both students and lecturers across 14 IoTs. The same study revealed that the resistance to a broadening of provision may be linked to the perceived lack of curricular space for languages. Creating virtual space for language learning, by using digital media, could provide a catalyst for change, while at the same time solving the space problem. A possible model for such a space has been created in Letterkenny Institute of Technology, where students have designed a website and blog to showcase intercultural and linguistic activities. Speakers of different languages have shared experiences, cookery demos and other aspects of cultural interest. This digital space continues to operate, albeit on an informal, extracurricular basis, within and beyond the Institute in the local community, where second level schools have participated on this online platform. Given the success of this informal learning platform, there is a case to be made for creating more structured learning pathways, using learning management systems such as Blackboard/Moodle to develop oral and written linguistic competencies mapped to the Common European Framework.

Keywords: higher education, linguistics, language policy.

1. Introduction.

This paper sets out to discuss the attitudes of students and lecturers within the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland, in relation to foreign language teaching and learning. Through

the examination of empirical data collected during a recent PhD investigation (Carthy, 2017), the paper presents the argument that the majority of staff and students are positively disposed towards languages. The study also highlights the lack of institutional language policies within the IoT sector and the disconnect that exists between the lack of provision of opportunities for language learning and the appetite for languages. Additionally, this paper provides a review of prior studies which have already made the case for building capacity in foreign languages. Alongside these studies and the government's *Languages Connect Strategy*, it is suggested that new digital platforms could be used to carve out new space for language learning. Examples of some award-winning platforms are described and possibilities for other learning pathways are explored.

1.1 Background.

Creating learning space for language education is one of many challenges facing Irish third level institutions in today's globalised world. However, a recent investigation has concluded that language provision is getting slowly squeezed out of many Institutes of Technology. In the absence of institutional language policies, it is probably that the erosion of curricular space for language provision will continue. Nonetheless, digital spaces could certainly be created to satisfy the appetite for language learning (as evidenced in both qualitative and quantitative data collected from both students and lecturers). A digital platform, created by students for language enthusiasts in Letterkenny Institute of Technology, provided a forum for learners from all disciplines. Linguistic and intercultural exchange are the main activities showcased on this multimedia website. Tandem partnerships, cultural presentations and visits to local sights are all documented, using oral and written media. Such platforms and other similar examples of best practice could be harnessed and used to provide learning pathways for those who are already motivated to choose a language, on the one hand, and stimulate and encourage those who are not.

Historically, the case for making space for language has been made many times, long before the current government-led strategy was launched. A series of investigations conducted from 2003 until 2009 sought to highlight the need for a dedicated institutional space for modern languages in Irish HEIs (Chambers, 2003; Bruen, 2004; Lauridsen, 2013; Tudor, 2009). One scholar attributed the '*whispering*' of modern languages to the '*roaring*' of the Celtic Tiger during the boom years, as it seemed that Ireland's economic performance was not suffering,

due to its lack of language skills (Zojer, 2010). Today, with BREXIT looming large, the Irish economy is likely to be enormously challenged by Britain's exit from the European Union. As the UK's closest neighbour, Ireland's international trade services are likely to be seriously affected, as 20% of Irish services depend of the UK market (Lynch, 2016). Furthermore, approximately 16 % of Ireland's exported goods are to Britain; the agrifood sector is under threat, with almost 50% of Irish food exports going to British markets. The Irish economy is exposed and vulnerable, due to its over-reliance on the UK. The potential of new markets offered by mainland European countries need to be explored; but in order to meet this challenge Ireland simply must improve the language skills of its workforce (EGFSN, 2016). This challenge has been identified in the new Languages Connect Strategy and is part of the government's current nationwide campaign (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

1.2 Institute of Technology Sector.

More recent empirical research (Carthy, 2017) conducted throughout the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland would suggest that the demand for language provision is not currently being met. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from both students and lecturers reveals that current institutional policy is out of step with prevailing attitudes towards the teaching and learning of languages. Given the appetite for language learning and the awareness of the manifold benefits of linguistic skills, why then is space not being created for language provision in the IoTs? The mismatch between institutional policy, on the one hand, and attitudes, on the other, is all the more alarming, in the light of the government's *Languages Connect Strategy* (DES, 2017) which has set the goal of increasing the number of third level students taking languages to 20%, as part of its nationwide campaign. This campaign not only aims to increase Ireland's competitiveness as a small open economy, but also equip Irish graduates with a valuable skillset for today's global workplace.

2. Appetite for language learning.

In this paper I consider the implications of some of the findings from my earlier research (Carthy, 2017). The data gathered from both lecturers and students across the IoT sector would certainly suggest that there is widespread awareness of the diverse benefits of learning

languages. The rigorous methodology chosen for the study, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowed a rich, multifaceted understanding of the prevailing situation to emerge. The quantitative phase consisted of two online questionnaires circulated to students and lecturers in all IoTs across the sector. This then informed a subsequent qualitative phase that involved 68 student and 69 lecturer interviews. The quantitative phase of data collection began in 2011: it incorporated two sets of student data, one during 2011-2012 and a second one in 2013-2014, and a single set of lecturer data. An online questionnaire was circulated to both cohorts and respondents were asked about their views on language provision. For ethical purposes, and in order to protect the identity of individual Institutes of Technology, all participating IoTs were numbered from 1 to 14. In total, 1814 (2011-2012) and 1291 (2013-2014) students completed questionnaires, while 420 lecturers responded. This constitutes a statistically viable response rate, according to Dörnyei (2007).

Fifty-four percent (2011-2012) and fifty-five percent (2013-2014) students and seventy-nine percent of lecturers of diverse academic backgrounds indicated that they would be in favour of institute-wide language modules. This finding was corroborated during the subsequent qualitative phase which collected data from a selection of both student and lecturer respondents. Sixty-nine lecturers and 68 students participated during the qualitative phase; semi-structured interviews enabled both cohorts to share their views. Support for institute-wide language modules was even greater in this set of data. Figure 1 (p. 5) encapsulates all data gathered in relation to institute-wide language provision.

Given this awareness of the benefits of language learning at grassroots level, it seems logical to ask why this is not being reflected at institutional policy level. The small percentage of negative data gathered from lecturers allowed further light to be shed on this anomaly. Nineteen percent had indicated that they were opposed to broadening language provision and some of these lecturers (45 in total -10% of all respondents) availed of the opportunity to contribute qualitative data to explain why. One of the issues highlighted by them was the lack of curriculum space and the associated timetabling constraints. This finding was interesting within the context of recent reductions in class contact hours in IoTs across the sector, as a result of the introduction of modularisation/semesterisation. These reductions came about

during the Periodic Programmatic Evaluation[1] process; these take place every four or five years in all IoTs and may be engendering negative attitudes towards timetabling space for language modules. The reticence expressed by this vociferous minority of lecturers in relation to a broadening of language provision provided a signpost for further investigation at the interview (qualitative) stage.

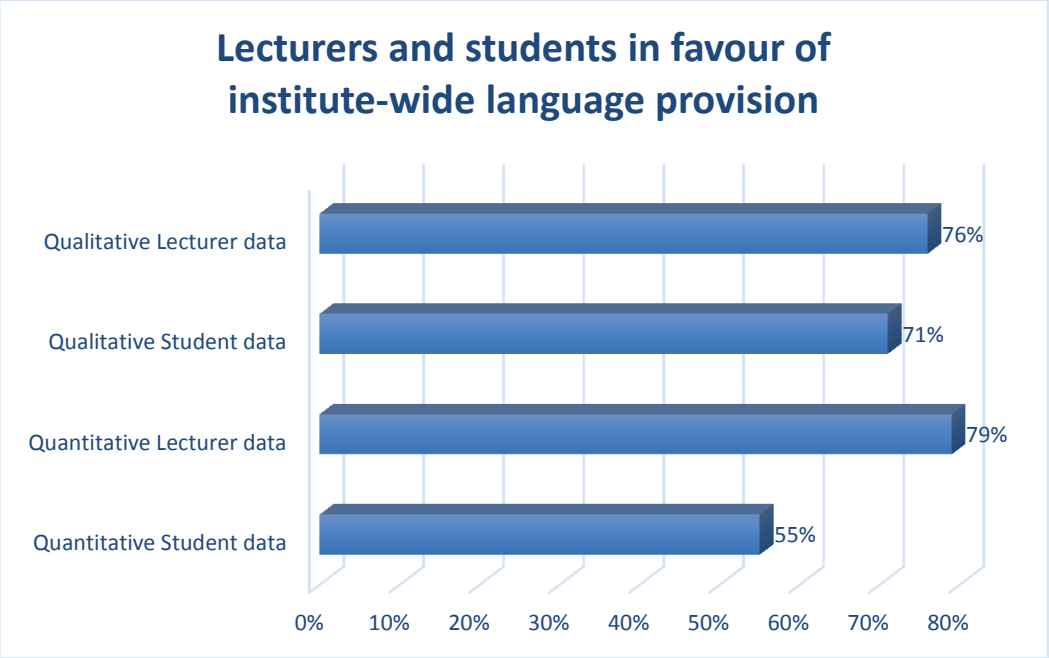

Figure 1: Proportion of lecturers and students in favour of institute-wide language provision.

In the subsequent qualitative phase of this investigation, a more precise picture to emerged. Fifty-one out of sixty-eight (seventy-six percent as illustrated above in Figure 1) interviewees from diverse academic backgrounds were in favour of broadening language provision; however, in spite of these positive attitudes, language provision is quite curtailed at their IoTs. Lecturers relayed anecdotes describing how language modules are restricted to certain

[1] PPE Periodic Programmatic Reviews take place every five years in order to review programmes, as part of quality assurance procedures. A visiting panel of experts conducts the review and makes recommendations.

disciplines with Business Studies. These data provide evidence of a mismatch between positive attitudes at grassroots level and a lack of top down institutional policy. This disconnect is preventing students from acquiring linguistic skills so much in demand in today's workplace.

2.1 Lack of traditional Curricular Space.

Nonetheless, the perception that scarce space will be taken up by offering language modules across all disciplines is a major obstacle to be overcome by policy makers in the IoTs. A prevailing mood of scepticism was also captured in this qualitative data. Lack of space for languages was by far the most cited obstacle among those who were sceptical about broadening provision, with 14 lecturers referring to it in the course of their interviews. Even at IoT 1, the only IoT with a [then] recently approved language policy, a lecturer observed that languages were getting '*squeezed out'*. A lecturer from IoT 2 believed that languages modules had come under pressure during the PPE and had had their weighting reduced from 10 to 5 credits; a language lecturer (also from IoT 2) explained that it was difficult to convince lecturers from other disciplines to incorporate languages. Likewise, a Finance lecturer from IoT 2 believed that there was virtually no space in the curriculum for non-core modules. An Engineering lecturer from IoT 5 explained that '*more important'* skills had been introduced during their recent PPE; he believed that there were too few opting to do the language elective to make it viable. Some, but not all, lecturers attributed this to the introduction of modularlisation/semesterisation.

Even in IoT 2, where traditionally much has been done to foster and promote language learning for all, there are obstacles to be overcome. At the time of interviewing a Language Policy was reaching the final stages of completion at Academic Council. Respondents were mostly positive in their attitudes towards language provision, and believed that languages were currently being offered as an accredited elective on most programmes. One lecturer from IoT 2, remarked that in theory these electives were being offered across the board, but in practice, students could not attend the classes, as their timetables were not free at the specified time. Traditionally, within the sector, it was felt by some that there has always been opposition to electives among lecturers (not just to language electives): two lecturers referred to Programme Boards as being an arena where lecturers argue for their own specialism or 'fight' over contact hours. This sense of territoriality has been highlighted in another study into the redeployment of German lecturers in the IoT sector (O'Shaughnessy, 2011). In theory, modu-

larisation/semesterisation should have allowed for more cross curricular module offerings; in practice, it was felt, the curriculum has become even more inflexible.

2.2 Digital Spaces for Languages.

Given the perceived curricular obstacles to a broadening of language provision in the IoTs described above, there is a case to be made for creating virtual spaces for language learning. Digital platforms have the potential to create new learning pathways for students wishing to improve their existing language competencies or, indeed, pick up a new language ab initio. In this context, three examples of best practice deserve to be mentioned. The first two examples have won Language Label Awards; the Lingo Club received the Award in 2012 and, more recently, the Languaculture Space in 2018. Both projects provide learning space for various different languages to students on a cross curricular basis. The Lingo Club was initially formed in 2006 in Letterkenny Institute of Technology in order to encourage tandem learning between native speakers of French, German, Spanish and Irish. The Club's goal was to promote communication between international and native students and facilitate the integration of Erasmus students into Irish society. Gradually, however, the remit of the Club grew to include activities such as dancing, school visits and competitions. The club's activities are showcased on a dedicated website and blog. More recently, the LanguaCulture Space project was set up in Dublin City University. This dedicated multilingual/ multicultural space offers a welcoming environment for communicating in languages other than English. This space encourages intercultural interaction among students from all disciplines and empowers learners to overcome prejudice and intolerance.

Another success story which might inspire educationalists at higher level is the ETwinning platform, set up in 2005 as the main action of the European Commission's E-Learning programme. It is a free online platform uniting a community of over 500,000 teachers across Europe. It enables primary and secondary schools to work on joint projects in any curricular area. While this specific ETwinning platform is currently confined to users at primary and secondary level, the concept of ETwinning could and should be embedded into learning platforms at third level and could certainly expose students from diverse academic backgrounds to learning opportunities they may never have considered at primary or secondary level. Such a

platform could certainly create authentic and immediate learning pathways, possibly leading to international mobility.

Moreover, in addition to the initiatives described above, which are essentially intended as informal, extracurricular spaces for students to learn, there are other structured pathways available. MOOCs are Massive Open Online Courses which are having a significant impact in how third level institutions deliver their courses. It is estimated that the first MOOC appeared approximately 10 years ago and was primarily intended for 'leisure learners' (Sandeen, 2013). The global reach of MOOCs is phenomenal; a recent DCU initiative in relation to the learning of Irish is a case in point. Links to Tandem MOOCs have been made available on the recently created Digilanguages portal, providing online resources for learning languages (including Irish). These MOOCs enable learners to interact with native speakers of their target language and earn credits and recognition for their learning efforts. It is generally believed that SPOCs (Small Private Online Courses) have been around since the mid-nineties and that they are more conducive to customised learner platforms than MOOCs. Such platforms for learning languages (notably English) already exist and appear to create a new dynamic in the teaching process (Zhang & Jin, 2018). Zhang's study suggests that this new virtual dynamic overcomes some of the limitations of the traditional language classroom, thereby creating a more effective learning experience. There is certainly a case to be made for harnessing such platforms across the IoT sector, in order to create space for teaching languages in the IoTs, in the absence of traditional curricular space.

How this might work in practice remains to be seen. Most IoTs currently have learning management systems already in place (Blackboard or Moodle) providing virtual learning environments for the teaching and learning of various subjects. For the most part, these tools are combined with more traditional classroom approaches; however, there is a recent trend towards stand-alone online courses, completely replacing the traditional classroom. Given the perceived scarcity of traditional curricular space for language provision, as identified in the empirical evidence described above, there is a case to be made for developing SPOCs for foreign language learning, closely aligned to the Common European Framework. For those who might be dubious about the effectiveness or pedagogical soundness of these platforms, it is worth noting that Blackboard provides both asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities; Blackboard Learn can be accessed whenever the student is free to do so, whereas

Blackboard Collaborate allows live instruction to take place. Various functions in the latter version allow immediate feedback to take place via quizzes etc; the potential for developing oral and listening skills inherent in these features is substantial. These virtual platforms could transcend space and time barriers, associated with traditional timetables and could provide open access to students on an institute-wide basis, indeed beyond the walls of IoTs.

3. Conclusion and recommendations.

The government's Languages Connect strategy has certainly set an ambitious target for Irish HEIs, by aspiring to increase the number of third level students learning languages to 20%. While there is substantial evidence to suggest that an appetite for language learning currently exists across the IoT sector, as detailed above, there are clearly curricular obstacles to be overcome in order to carve out space for this to happen. On the one hand, the empirical evidence illustrated above, presents a convincing case for broadening language provision in the IoTs, on the other, it gives an insight as to the hurdles to be overcome. The perceived threat that a broadening of language provision poses to core subject areas is evident in the qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated above and represents an obstacle to change. Digital spaces, operating alongside traditional curricular spaces or on a stand-alone basis, might assuage these fears, while at the same time, using innovative technologies to motivate more learners to take on the challenge of language learning. A working group, consisting of language and technology experts across the IoT sector, should be created to explore this potential and carve out a new virtual space for languages

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