

The EU and the Irish Language - conserving linguistic diversity

Seán Ó Riain, Brussels (www.seanoriain.eu), “Gaeltacht Europe”, 16.6.2007

Part I: Relevant recent developments at the European Level

A – EU official support for multilingualism, 23 working languages, Commissioner for Multilingualism since 1.1.2007. Irish now benefits.

B – Main threat to multilingualism: exponential growth in the use of English, documented in e.g. “*English-Only Europe?*” by Prof. Robert Phillipson, 2003.

- a) February 2002: British children may end foreign language study at age 14.
- b) September 2005: GRIN¹ report shows that international dominance of English brings € 17 billion annually to the British economy, and 4% of this to Ireland. German MEP Michael Gahler proposes a reduction in the number of British and Irish nationals working at EU institutions, to compensate for the unfair advantage to anglophones of having their language as the EU lingua franca.
- c) 26 March 2007: Slovak Deputy PM Čaplovič proposes to EU Foreign Ministers that EU language policy be discussed at inter-governmental level.
- d) 22 May 2007: Italian Minister for European Affairs Emma Bonino publicly supports the Slovak initiative at a conference in Brussels.
- e) 9 May 2007: Nobel Prize winner, Prof. Reinhard Selten of Bonn University, proposes that some EU states should agree to promote Esperanto as the first foreign language in schools, to improve language-learning in general, as “*the propedeutical effect is so strong that a foreign language can be learned more quickly in this way that by teaching the foreign language alone*”.²

Part 2: The new EU status of Irish

- a) EU Council of Ministers decision of 13.6.2005, took effect on 1.1.2007.
- b) Irish first used at Council on 22.1.2007 – used 13 times by 30.6.07.

Part 3: Serious problem in the teaching of Irish

a) Harris Report 1984: 30.4% of pupils at “ordinary” primary schools mastered each objective in Irish.

b) Tuairisc Harris 2006: “While a majority of pupils make at least minimal progress, the percentage who now achieve ... mastery has fallen significantly since the mid-1980s.” (p 162). “... a decrease of 20.4% in the case of Fluency of Oral Description and of 21.1% in the case of the Communication (second grade) objective.” (p 75).

¹ Original report, in French, at http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hcee/documents/rapport_Grin.pdf. One-page summary in 22 languages, including Irish, at <http://lingvo.org/grin/>.

² Full text, in German, at <http://www.liberafolio.org/2007/seltendeutsch>. Excerpts, in 22 languages, at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/011-6466-129-05-19-902-20070507IPR06397-09-05-2007-2007-true/default_en.htm

Therefore we clearly have a serious problem, and cannot afford to exclude any teaching method which could help solve this problem.

Part 4 – Can the propedeutical approach help the teaching of Irish?

- a) “propedeutical”: It is generally accepted that any second language which has been thoroughly learnt tends to improve subsequent language learning – there is a language-learning skills transfer effect. For instance, the “**Biberacher Modell**” – use of Latin to improve foreign language learning, is in use in 60 secondary schools in Baden-Württemberg (FAZ, 30.12.2006).
- b) **Esperanto appears to have this propedeutic quality in a more highly-developed form, and appears to be particularly helpful to weaker students.** This is borne out by a long series of experiments since 1918³ in countries as diverse as the US (Columbia University, New York, 1920s), UK (University of Sheffield, 1950s), Hungary (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 1960s), Germany (University of Paderborn, 1970s), Australia (Monash University, 1990s). Why has this method of improving language-teaching not been more widely-used? Why did the metric system need 2 centuries to spread worldwide?⁴
- c) **Paderborn University:** Group A received 800 hours of English over 5 years. Group B reached a similar level of English after 104 hours of Esperanto and 635 hours of English.
- d) “**Springboard2Languages**”⁵: Since September 2006, some 110 pupils in 2 British primary schools have been studying “propedeutical” Esperanto, under the supervision of the University of Manchester.
- e) **Why Esperanto?** 1) Regularity; 2) Transparency; 3) Internationality.
- f) **Dr Eugene Mc Kendry**, Director of NI Centre for Information on Language Teaching, Queen’s University, Belfast.⁶ *“I would propose the idea of Irish and English in the primary school, and, when possible, Esperanto as the third language, to ensure adequate preparation for subsequent language-learning.”*

Wikipedia now exists in 253 languages

Gaeilge (86ú háit – 5,169 alt) - <http://ga.wikipedia.org>

Esperanto (15ú háit – 86,433 alt) - <http://eo.wikipedia.org>

³ http://www.springboard2languages.org/documents/springboard_rationale.pdf

⁴ France adopted the metric system in 1791; 3 countries have not adopted it yet: US, Liberia and Myanmar.

⁵ www.springboard2languages.org

⁶ TCD conference on education organized by Conradh na Gaeilge on 12 September 2006.