Ireland's Foreign Language Skills Deficit

Sheree Borge, Cork Institute of Technology   Sheree.Borge@cit.ie

11th May 2011

The Lisbon Strategy, introduced in 2000, set the EU the target of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. Included in this strategy was the achievement of greater social cohesion, while also sustaining economic growth and the creation of jobs. Education policy is a central tenet of the Lisbon Strategy, and "language learning is crucial in this respect."[1]

Learning one *lingua franca* alone is not enough. For example, only 21% of German and 23% of Austrian 25-64 year olds (i.e. the age group that makes the purchasing and business decisions in German companies) feel capable of doing business through English.[2] The repercussion for Irish exports is thereby evident. The draft report of the European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education states that "the modern entrepreneur is facing a very complex world with a whole new set of problems and challenges. Starting by facing different cultures in a globalised world [*sic*] where international networks are real and where a lack of languages knowledge can represent a barrier. Within this context we must insist on the acquisition of diversified language skills since it enables citizens to derive full economic, social and cultural benefit."[3]

Learning and speaking other languages encourages a more open approach to others, their cultures and outlooks. It also enhances cognitive skills and strengthens mother tongue skills, including reading and writing. The objective of the European Commission is a "truly multilingual European society", and the ultimate goal is that every citizen will have practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue[4].

The Commission has devised the following objectives in conjunction with Member State governments, the European Parliament, the European regions and social partners:

- "[To] Give citizens the chance of learning two languages in addition to their mother tongue from an early age;
- Create friendlier societies, where different communities and individuals engage in dialogue with one another;
- Strengthen the role of languages in improving employability and competitiveness."[5]

In 2012 the Commission will review the progress that has been made. Ireland will undoubtedly be one of the member states scrutinised for non-implementation of the objectives set out by the Commission. Ireland is also not taking part in a current survey on language skills, which will feed into a Europe-wide indicator on language competences at secondary school level.

There has been much activity by language experts, both domestically and on a Europe-wide level, in assessing language teaching and learning proficiencies and promoting foreign language and cultural knowledge acquisition. In Ireland, for example, the following groups are actively engaged in this process:

- The IoT (Institutes of Technology) Languages Strategy Network. Members: AIT, ITB, CIT, DkIT, GMIT, LyIT, LIT, IT Sligo, ITTD, ITT, WIT, DIT . Aim: to adopt a pro-active

---

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/languages-of-europe/doc4021_en.htm

[2] McPartlin, Deirdre. 'Lost in Translation - Could a lack of language skills damage Irish exports?' *The Market.* Enterprise Ireland: vol 07, issue 01, December 2010/January 2011, pg. 12-13.
http://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/Publications/The-Market/Dec10-Jan11-The-Market.pdf

[3] 'On university-business dialogue: a new partnership for the modernisation of Europe's universities' (01.02.2010) Accessed 23.04.2011:
www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+COMPARL+PE-438.275+01+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&language=EN

[4] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. 'The european indicator of language competence'. Page 3. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/lexuriserv/lexuriserv.do?uri=com:2005:0356:fin:en:pdf

[5] http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/languages-of-europe/doc4248_en.htm

approach to language learning and teaching and to foster greater inter-institutional collaboration for languages within the IoT sector. Website: www.languagesinireland.ie

- The Business German in Ireland Working Group (third-level teachers of Business German with representatives from most Irish third-level colleges). Winner of the Kuratorium award for 2010, which is presented annually by German-Irish Chamber of Commerce (website: http://irland.ahk.de/index.php?id=ueber_uns&L=15) to groups, individuals or organisations who have made a special contribution to the furthering of German-Irish relations in Ireland.

A Eurobarometer study conducted in 2010 showed that 40 % of recruiters in the industry sector highlighted the importance of language skills for future higher education graduates.[6] When it comes to language policy implementation in Ireland, the focus - both in government and in the media - has been almost solely on the Irish language. Unless this blinkered approach is rectified, Irish graduates will be at a competitive disadvantage on the job market. The "Languages for Jobs" EU Commission working group (their report is to be published in Autumn 2011) has noted that there is a gap between supply and demand, and not only demand from large multinational employers; there is also high demand across Europe by SMEs for multilingual speakers. Irish SMEs need languages as part of their internationalisation strategy for export market growth; however, this demand is not being met by Irish educational institutions. In his report on the lack of a language policy in Ireland, Professor David Little says: "No country that is serious about social cohesion internally and the ability to engage with other countries externally can afford not to have a carefully considered and integrated language education policy." [7]

Conducting a job search with key words such as FRENCH, SPANISH, or GERMAN on the website www.jobs.ie clearly demonstrates the requirement in Ireland for modern languages such as German, French, Spanish and Italian in the Banking and Finance, Accounting, Sales and Marketing, Programming and IT, Customer Services, Legal, and Tourism and Travel sectors (see Appendix B (pg. 5-10) for examples of positions advertised on 11.05.2011). There is also a certain level of demand for other languages such as Danish, Dutch, Flemish, Russian, Chinese, Albanian and Polish in the IT and customer service sectors, as well as positions in translation and interpreting agencies.

Insufficient awareness in the general public of the importance of foreign language acquisition has caused a number of foreign language programmes at third level to be closed down, including programmes such as a Degree in Software Development with French or German. This is despite the fact that Irish graduates with such qualifications are in high demand. It should be noted that, once a programme or even a module has been dropped, it is very difficult to reinstate it, as the budget is then no longer available for that programme or module.

Students are not being encouraged sufficiently to take languages. A number of IoT courses are now running language programmes in Years 1 and 2 only, as uptake in third and fourth year is low (due in no small part to the stark choice between competing electives that these students face), and management cannot endorse small class sizes due to budgetary constraints. Many Science and Engineering programmes do not offer students the option to take a language at any stage of their course. In the case of some Business degree programmes, as a direct result of modularisation, languages are competing as elective modules against subjects such as Event Management, Air and Cruiseline Operations, Law, Accounting, Communications, or Marketing. The two languages in the IoT sector that are most under threat are German and Italian, and former German and Italian (and, in some cases, French) language lecturers have had to move into other subject areas, such as Communications or English as a Foreign Language. French and Spanish have experienced a certain increase in student numbers in recent years in the IoT sector, and some Irish universities are reporting

---

[6] http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/news/news4738_en.htm

[7] Little, D. (2009) *"We don't do policy here"-The case of Ireland.* London: 18.12. 2009: http://www2.lse.ac.uk/language/pdf/LETPP%20-%20David%20Little.pdf

Sheree Borge, Cork Institute of Technology   Sheree.Borge@cit.ie

a slight uptake in foreign languages generally over the past couple of years; however, these numbers are not increasing quickly enough to meet with demand from industry.

The modernisation of the Leaving Certificate Science syllabi is currently on the agenda of the Department of Education and Skills. The Irish government also needs to embrace foreign language acquisition as part of its strategy for economic recovery. Ireland must actively participate in the ongoing dialogue at EU level about the importance of foreign language acquisition. Domestically, awareness must also be raised, by conveying a clear and positive message to parents, schools, colleges, universities, as well as the business world, that knowledge of foreign languages and cultures is vital, not only to our economic recovery, but also to the development of versatile and outward-looking young people. In the UK, leading businessman Roland Rudd has launched a CILT (National Centre for Languages) campaign, calling on the business community to recognise the importance of language skills to the economy and employment.[8] We need to launch a similar campaign in Ireland, which could be achieved through collaboration between the Department of Education and Skills and groups like the Languages Strategy Network, Business German in Ireland Working Group, the various cultural institutes based in Ireland, and the various embassies (Swiss, Austrian, German, French, Italian, and Spanish etc.).

The introduction and/or maintenance of foreign language programmes in ALL schools, and also in all departments of colleges and universities throughout Ireland must be facilitated. Once this is achieved, provision of more well-trained foreign language teachers at primary, secondary, and third-level will be required. In addition, 'upskilling' courses for teachers at all levels would ensure that the most up-to-date language teaching methodologies are being employed at primary, secondary, and third-level by teachers and lecturers. Continued mastery of target languages within the language teaching community in Ireland could be supported by a wider introduction of mobility programmes (e.g. courses abroad) for teachers at all levels.

It is also vital that funding for up-to-date technology be provided for language classrooms at primary, secondary, and third level, so that software such as Moodle, TeacherTube and Google Docs, as well as multimedia language lab software, can be used to engage students with the target language in a contemporary, holistic, and interactive way.

At third level, foreign language skills must be promoted as an essential component of Science, Engineering and Business degrees, as well as of more traditional Arts and Humanities degrees. Work placement and study abroad programmes are currently experiencing cuts in funding; the Irish government should be campaigning for greater funding to be allocated to work and study placement programmes such as Leonardo and Erasmus. Participation in these programmes is highly valued by potential employers, as it not only enhances foreign language skills but also fosters cultural awareness and greater communicative competence.

A recent report (March 2011) by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs states:

> "Where job vacancies arise, jobseekers with third level qualifications coupled with work experience and foreign language skills were more likely to be in demand by employers. This underlines the need for jobseekers to engage in upskilling and for the education and training system to continually align with the skills needs of enterprise."[9]

The time to act is now.

---

[8] http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/news/news%20items/workplace/languages%20work%20pledge.aspx

[9] Report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs: 'Third level qualifications coupled with work experience and foreign language skills in demand by employers' 30th March 2011. **http://www.egfsn.ie/newsevents/news/title,7647,en.php**

Appendix A

Further Resources:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc830_en.htm

http://www.forfas.ie/media/egfsn050608_foreign_languages_press_release.pdf

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/multiling_en.html

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/lingua/br2007_en.pdf

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc60_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/languages-of-europe/doc4015_en.htm

Sites of Interest:

Goethe Institute Dublin http://www.goethe.de/ins/ie/dub/enindex.htm

The MOLAN project http://www.molan-network.org/

Association of Third-Level Teachers of German in Ireland. http://www.germaninireland.org/

Gesellschaft der Deutschlehrer Irlands (German Teachers' Association of Ireland) http://www.germanteachers.ie/

Alliance Francaise Ireland http://www.alliance-francaise.ie/

The French Teacher's Association of Ireland. Website: http://www.ncte.ie/ftai/

Applied French Association. Website: www.afa-irlande.ie

Appendix B

Examples of jobs in Ireland requiring foreign language skills

Sample website: www.jobs.ie

All of the examples listed in this Appendix are extracts taken from job descriptions on the website www.jobs.ie on 11.05.2011.

Key search terms used: German OR French OR Spanish OR Italian

<u>Findings:</u>
<u>Key sectors requiring German, French, Spanish and Italian are:</u>
Banking/Finance/Accounting
Sales/Marketing
Programming/IT
Customer Services
Legal
Tourism and Travel

<u>Note:</u> There were multiple job listings for speakers of German, French, Spanish and Italian. Listed in this document are some examples only.
There were also a number of requests for languages such as Finnish, Danish and other Nordic languages, Dutch, Flemish, Chinese, Albanian and Polish in various sectors such as IT and customer service, as well as positions advertised by a translation and interpreting agency (Lionbridge Interpretations, Dun Laoghaire).

The following notice appears on the www.jobs.ie website:
"Want this job, but not fully qualified? Check out Languages Courses in our Training Section on Jobs.ie!"

_____

Banking/Finance/Accounting:
1.   **<u>German Accounts Payable Specialist</u>**
         Company: Morgan McKinley
         Location: Cork
Requirements include:
- At least 12-18 months experience within an accounting environment
- Must be coming from a multinational or SSC environment
- Certificate/Diploma in Business/Accounting
- **Have fluent German**
- Knowledge of AP Processes
- Computer literacy, incl.- basic knowledge of MS Excel
- Proficiency in ORACLE
- Excellent communication skills

2.   **<u>Fraud Agent - French</u>**
Company: PayPal
Location: Dublin
Requirements include:
• **Fluency in English & French**
• Ability to work independently and practice sound judgment.

• Ability to make discretionary decisions based on research.
• A certain degree of creativity and latitude is required.
• Leadership and time management skills.
• Excellent communication skills, both written and oral.

3.　　**Policy Administrator with German**
Company: undisclosed (via Manpower Ireland recruitment agency)
Location: Dublin
Requirements:
"It is desirable that the potential jobholder has experience in international life assurance, financial or customer services and mostly all of the above areas. "
They will also have:
* An ability to work in a small flexible team operating to tight deadlines.
* Excellent communications and interpersonal skills.
* A strong customer service orientation
"It is essential that the potential jobholder is **a fluent German speaker**. Possession of a **second European language preferably Spanish** (would be a distinct advantage) in order to process foreign language documentation and deal with international service centres. Good verbal and written English is also a prerequisite of the role."

4.　　**Payroll Specialist**
Company: AOL Global Operations
Location: Dublin
Requirements:
French and German language skills
BA/BS degree in HR or relevant field.
"Experienced payroll professional with direct responsibility in managing effective. internal controls and compliance across the payroll function.
Excellent analytical and accuracy skills, and highly organised with the ability to prioritise.
Excellent interpersonal skills.
5- 6 Years payroll experience."

5.　　**Compliance Analyst**
Company: PayPal
Location: Dublin
Requirements include:
•**Fluency in Italian, English and French**
•An understanding of regulatory compliance issues is essential to this role and decisions made may impact PayPal's standing with the regulatory authorities.
•Previous Regulatory Compliance experience within a financial institution.

Sales and Marketing:

1.　　**Online Sales Account Strategist (Spanish) - EU Headquarters**
Company: Google Ireland
Location: Dublin
"Positions are available for fluent speakers of one or more of the following languages: **Czech, French, German, Romanian, Russian, Spanish and Ukrainian.**
Requirements include:
- BA / BS degree or equivalent with a strong academic record.
- Relevant customer / client service experience, preferably within an online environment.
- Demonstrated creativity: in writing, communication and presentations.
- Marketing background an advantage but not essential.
- Proven analytical and research skills.
- Meticulous attention to detail.
- **Fluency in written and spoken English and chosen language."**

2.   Spanish, Italian or French IT Sales
Company: Adecco Multilingual
Location: Dublin
Requirements include:
* 2-4 years solution sales experience, and preferably within a technology environment
*Excellent communications skills
*Bachelor´s degree preferred
* **Fluency in one of the following languages: Spanish, French or Italian**
* **Fluent English (written and spoken)**

3.   Sales Positions for French, German and Dutch
Company: Reed Multilingual and Shared Services Division
Location: Dublin
 Requirements include:
• "Excellent communications skills - must be able to close the deal
• You must have prior sales experience, preferably within a technology environment
• You **need to be fluent in French, German or Dutch as you will be selling to a customer base with that same language**
• In addition to a European Language, you will also need to be proficient in English. In general, given that we service multiple language groups on-site, **fluency in many languages is a definite plus**
• Preferably you will have a University degree although this is not essential"

_____

Customer Support:

1.   Support Agents - German speaking x 7
Company: Apple
 Location: Cork
Skills and Experience:
•Demonstrated Customer Service experience.
•Customer focus
"Fluency in German and English is essential. Written and verbal skills in these languages must be excellent"

2.   Photography Support Professionals - French or German
Company: Stream Global Services
Location: Dublin
" **Stream gives you the opportunity to:**
Join a leading international company in worldwide technical support
Broaden your technical skills by attending extracurricular training.
Achieve advanced certification.
Broaden your language skills by following various language courses.
Broaden your horizon by working on various accounts and product teams, gaining work- and product experience.
Enjoy our extensive benefits package.
Requirements include:
- "Good knowledge and understanding of photography basics and computer operating systems
- Customer service skills
- Ability to work independently and in a team environment when necessary
- Attention to detail
- **Fluent French or Fluent German**
- Flexibility to work various shifts and good time management skills
- Previous exposure and experience of using photographic equipment would be advantageous"

_____

Programming/IT:

1.   Technical Support Engineer, French, German or Spanish Speaking
Company: Cerner
Location: Dublin

Minimum Qualifications:
•"Bachelor's degree in Computer Science or Computer Engineering or equivalency
•Ability to work a shift assigned between 7 am to 7 pm and participate in an on-call pager rotation
•Effective written and verbal communication skills
•Fluent in English & French, German or Spanish

Preferred Qualifications:
•SQL, Eclipse, Visual Basic, Java and C++ experience preferred
•Professional Client Relationship skills beneficial
•Ability to work on multiple projects simultaneously
•Additional language skills an advantage"

2.   Finnish Or French Or German Applications Analyst
Company: undisclosed multinational (via Computer People recruitment agency)
Location: Dublin

Successful applicants will have an opportunity to travel to the client site in Europe for a few weeks for training.

Requirements include:
- "**Finnish or French or German fluent speaker**
- English fluent speaker
- Windows Operating Systems; Microsoft Office; Network Connectivity; Print Services; Hardware; Microsoft outlook client and OWA.
- Ability and desire to build additional technical skills
- Ability to interact effectively with others in a team environment
- Professional skills: problem solving/troubleshooting, analytical, written and oral communication, administrative and organisational"

_____

Training/Education:
Training Specialist - Sales/Business Development
Company: eBay
Location: Dublin
Requirements include:
• "Previous experience (minimum 2 years) of design and delivery of programs with an emphasis on one or more of the following; Sales, Business Development and/or Account Management programmes
• Strong communication skills with a natural ability in influencing and negotiation skills.
• Reporting – experience and ability to produce reports and reflect measures of success as required
• Ability to work within a team but also able to use own initiative
• Computer literate – good knowledge of Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint etc.
• Additional languages such as German/French is not essential but is desirable
• Flexibility to travel from time to time
Qualification/Requirements:
• A primary Degree in a business related discipline
• A relevant training qualification (e.g. CIPD) is desirable"

_____

Legal:

1. **Legal Assistant, Trademarks (Spanish and Italian) - EU Headquarters**
Company: Google Ireland
Location: Dublin
Requirements:

- **"BA/BS degree** or equivalent with a strong academic record.
- Legal qualifications or academic experience preferred.
- Related experience with an Internet company preferred.
- **Native-level fluency in written and spoken English. Additional fluency in Spanish and Italian.**
- Excellent analytical skills, as well as exceptional written and verbal communication skills.
- Ability to prioritize and meet deadlines."

2. **License Support Coordinator - Fluent in German or Dutch**
Company: McAfee
Location: Cork
Experience

- "Experience with global software licensing
- Database knowledge as Insight (Siebel application)
- Solid experience of either software sales, operations, compliance or support/maintenance
- Bachelor's Degree or related experience
- **Fluent in English and either German or Dutch or a Nordic language both in reading and writing**
- Strong organizational and time management skills
- Outstanding oral and written communication skills
- Experience in managing projects
- **Additional European, particularly Nordic, languages are also highly desirable"**

Tourism/Travel:

1. **Holiday Sales Consultant - German**
Company: RCI
Location: Cork
Requirements include:

- **"Fluency in German with a high proficiency in English is essential**
- An ability to handle challenging sales situations
- Capability to multi-task
- Be an enthusiastic team player who learns fast in an upbeat energetic sales centre
- Good computer application skills is a must
- Excellent telephone manner
- Experience of working in a sales environment or call centre would be a distinct advantage, though not a necessity as full training will be provided"

2. **Reservations Sales Agent (French-English) AND Reservations Sales Agent (Spanish-English)**
Company: Marriott International
Location: Cork
Position: Reservations Sales Agent, fluent in French and English
Start Date: 21st July 2011

3.   <u>**German speaking Sales & Service Associate**</u>

Company: Starwood Hotels

Location: Cork

"The Sales & Service Associate will receive and process calls from travel agents, business houses and the general public, book reservations and provide information on all Starwood brands/properties, in a professional manner with specific emphasis on sales and service to the caller in accordance with guidelines, policies and procedures.

Position Requirements: Candidates must be computer literate with an excellent telephone manner, the ability to work independently and have strong aptitude for Sales and Customer Services.

Fluency in German and English essential."

Miscellaneous:

<u>**French Operations Coordinator**</u>

Company: undisclosed large multinational (via CPL Managed Services recruitment agency)

Location: Dublin

10-month contract

<u>**Requirements**</u>

•" Minimum 3 - 5 years demonstrated work experience in an operations environment including, account management, customer service, business operations, licensing, supply chain management or logistics.

• BA/BS or equivalent required.

• Demonstrated excellence in customer service/credit analysis and/or account management.

• General knowledge of international business and **a high degree of cultural awareness and sensitivity required.**

• Strong analytical and problem solving skills

• Ability to develop and execute creative solutions.

• Strong oral and written communication skills, including presentation experience and interpersonal skills.

• Must be highly self-motivated

• **Fluent English and French**

• **Third language a distinct advantage.(German, Arabic)"**