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Isabel McNally (*seated, right*) and other pupils with their schoolmistress in San Pedro, ca. 1900
(*Centro Argentino Irlandés de San Pedro*)

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The Spanish Language in Ireland

By David Barnwell

This article provides an overview of the situation of Spanish in the Irish educational system and in wider society. Spain enjoys positive attitudes among Irish people, helped by the considerable amount of property in that country purchased by Irish during the past few years. The Spanish language has over the years experienced mixed fortunes as regards its place in Irish education. Recently, however, there has been a moderate increase in the numbers studying Spanish across all sectors. Other European languages have lost students, while uptake for Spanish has increased. Numbers studying Spanish lag far behind those studying French, however, and in fact there is a general tendency towards a decrease in the study of languages nationally. The future is problematic, since any weakening of the requirement that those seeking admission to the National University of Ireland must have studied foreign languages will tend to detract from their status. Another factor that is very hard to predict is the effect of mass immigration - there are now over 100 languages spoken in Ireland - on linguistic policy.

Introduction

In Ireland, the compulsory educational system is the competence of the Department of Education and Science. This branch of the Government controls the curriculum, examinations and teacher certification up to the Leaving Certificate level (the Leaving Certificate is the final exam for school-leavers, generally taken around the age of seventeen or eighteen). The State-run Irish educational system may be divided into two categories, primary and secondary.

Primary Sector

For many years, no foreign languages were offered in the Irish primary sector (schools for children between about five and twelve years of age). Since a significant part of the primary school curriculum revolves around the teaching of the Irish language, there was considered to be no time for an extra language. In 1998 however, the Department of Education and Science launched a limited project to introduce the teaching of foreign languages (French, German, Italian and Spanish) in primary schools. This initiative has been quite successful, though limited to a minority of the nation's schools. Perhaps as many as 4,000 children now take Spanish in primary schools, though it should be reiterated that this is but a small fraction of the total number of children in these schools. (1)

Secondary Sector

The study of a foreign language is not compulsory in the Irish secondary school curriculum. Nevertheless a large majority of students in second-level schools (from approximately thirteen to eighteen years of age) do take a foreign language for at least part of their time in school. Since the decline of interest in the classical languages, French has for many years been dominant among foreign languages in the schools. A generation or two ago, Spanish was a relatively close second, Ireland at that time having the highest proportion of students taking Spanish as a foreign language in any European country.

German and Italian were the only other foreign languages taught at Irish schools, but they lagged far behind in numbers. Spanish was in some cases promoted by individual enthusiasts of the language, in an *ad hoc* way rather than as a coherent school policy. Up to the 1970s it was quite common for the language to be taught by a religious person who had lived in Spain or Latin America. Indeed the author of this article was introduced to Spanish by an Irish Christian Brother who had spent some years in Chile. Spanish at that time tended to be the foreign language offered in boys' schools, girls being directed more towards studying French.

By the late 1980s and 1990s, however, German was making significant progress and Spanish was relegated to a distant third place. At a time

of strength for the German economy, paralleled by weakness in the economy of Ireland, German was associated with prosperity and employment. The falling of the Berlin Wall also drew very positive attention to that country. By the mid-1990s, however, interest in German began to decline. French threatened to monopolise language choice in the schools, much as it had done in Britain years earlier, not through any set policy or as a result of rational discussion, but rather through a certain inertia and *laissez-faire* attitude.

Micheál Martin, who was at the time Irish Minister for Education, became concerned about the growing hegemony of French. He therefore made several million Irish pounds available for a programme to strengthen the place of 'minority' languages in the schools (minority in the sense that only a minority of schools were offering them) and to promote diversity in the language offerings available to Irish children. This was quite a unique initiative in European terms, since until then no European Government had sought to intervene in ensuring that a wide range of languages were available to students.

The Department of Education and Science implemented Martin's policy by launching an initiative in 2000 to enhance and expand the teaching of 'minority' languages in post-primary schools (specifically Spanish and Italian) as well as to introduce new ones (Russian and Japanese). (2) The Initiative produced a significant amount of promotional material, such as videos aimed at school principals and parents for the purpose of prompting interest in taking up 'minority' languages. Schools participating in the Initiative could apply for extra funding to purchase pedagogical materials as well as enjoying more generous terms for employing specialist teachers than were available for other subjects.

New programmes in teacher education were set up, and a Postgraduate Diploma course in language and teaching methodology was offered at several third level institutions. In the case of Spanish, the Government Initiative provided financial support for the national linguistics institute (ITÉ) to run workshops for teachers of Spanish. There was also support for the Institute to engage in materials production for the teaching of the language. One of the problems facing the teaching of Spanish in the secondary sector has traditionally been the reliance on textbooks published in England. As a result of the initiative, a new Spanish textbook META was published in Ireland. (3) The book was attractively designed and methodologically up-to-date, and bore favourable comparison with Spanish textbooks published elsewhere.

It is would be inaccurate to assign credit for the increase in numbers taking Spanish in Ireland solely to the Government Languages Initiative. There have been parallel increases in a number of Northern European countries in which there was no Government intervention. For example, for Sweden the Instituto Virtual Cervantes speaks of "the enormous growth in Spanish in Sweden, it is important to take into account that until just ten years ago, Spanish did not exist as a school subject in compulsory education. The only languages that pupils could opt for were German and French". (4) Similar strides have been taken by Spanish in other countries.

An indication of trends in language study in the Irish secondary sector may be seen in the following set of statistics: (5)

	2001	**2007**	**Trend**
French	33,818	27,805	-17,8 per cent
German	9,379	7,539	-19,6 per cent
Spanish	1,483	2,660	+79,0 per cent

As can be seen, the numbers of students taking Spanish have increased, though from a very low base. The opposite movement has occurred in the cases of German and French. Generally, there is a worrying trend towards decrease in the numbers taking languages to Leaving certificate level. 79 per cent of all students sat a foreign language exam in 2001, compared to 74 per cent in 2007. The figures are quite high, but the British experience has shown that, unless continuously supported in the curriculum, foreign languages can suffer precipitate falls in student numbers. There are now schools in Ireland where as many as half the youngest pupils are studying no foreign language, a situation unheard of a decade ago.

Of all the students taking the Leaving Certificate only about one in twenty-five takes Spanish. An important point in considering the situation of Spanish in the secondary schools is that the National University of Ireland network of universities requires for entry that a student have successfully studied a foreign language. Though this policy is coming under strain, it remains as a very important motivator for language study in the secondary sector. Were the requirement to be removed, it is feared that a substantial decline in numbers taking foreign languages would occur.

A person wishing to obtain a permanent teaching position in the secondary sector in Ireland must possess a degree in the subject they wishes to teach. This degree, if the person wishes to teach a language, must include significant work in literature. The requirement has affected a number of Spanish people who wished to make a career out of teaching their language in the public system in Ireland. There is also a requirement that the person show some competence in the Irish language. Teachers from Spain have complained about this, though the level of competence required in Irish is low, and could be attained with some effort.

The Ministerio de Educación, Política Social y Deporte (Ministry of Education, Social Policy and Sports) of Spain runs what is called an Asesoría Técnica Docente (Teaching Technical Consultancy) in Dublin, a sub-office of the Consejería de Educación de España en el Reino Unido e Irlanda (Educational Department of the Spanish Embassy in the United Kingdom and Ireland) in London. The function of this office is to support the teaching of Spanish in Ireland, through provision of advice on materials, study and teaching opportunities in Spain, and so on. There has been a little resentment that the Spanish Ministry in this manner sees Ireland as a region of the United Kingdom, but the personnel employed as asesores (advisers) in Dublin have been well received and their work much appreciated by teachers of Spanish in Ireland.

Third Level

There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland, and two in Northern Ireland. Spanish has been taught at Trinity College Dublin since the eighteenth century, and at University College Dublin since 1884. The latter now has the largest Department of Spanish on the island. It was only in the early twentieth century that the subject became part of the academic programme of institutions outside Dublin such as University College Cork and National University of Ireland, Galway. 1926 saw the creation of Chairs of Spanish at two institutions, Trinity College Dublin and Queens University Belfast. The Irish universities offer programmes of study in Spanish to Bachelor, Masters and doctoral level.

Most of the universities accept students *ab initio*, people who did not take Spanish at secondary school and have no prior knowledge of the language. These students are given the first year to catch up with students who have studied Spanish in secondary school or elsewhere; thereafter all students take the same language courses. The focus and approach at the universities tend to be fairly traditional, with an emphasis on the literature and high culture of the Spanish-speaking world. The literature of Spain has historically been better covered than that of Latin America in Irish universities. This imbalance still exists, but a number of younger faculty members in the universities are now offering courses on Latin America, especially Mexico.

There is some interdisciplinarity, such as courses on Spanish-language cinema, on comparative literature or European Studies, but much remains to be done in integrating Spanish with other disciplines. The Irish system is a long way from the flexibility of the American model, where students can take a course or two in areas outside their major subject. In Ireland students generally do not have the opportunity to take a language course unless it is part of their degree programme.

Hispanic linguistics is rarely taught, unless it is as philology, while there has been no movement towards country studies such as have become popular at the better American universities, courses which combine the study of the culture, history, literature and politics of a particular country as a case study. A lacuna in Irish departments of Spanish is that no-one appears to have attempted to organise courses that deal with the links between Ireland and the Spanish-speaking world. In the past few years there has been a burgeoning of interest among historians in Spanish-Irish shared history, as well as in studying the experience of Irish emigrants and their descendents in Latin America. So far, however, the Irish departments of Spanish have not found a role in participating in this research.

In some instances Spanish is also taught at what are known as Institutes of Technology. As the name suggests, these are third-level colleges that concentrate on science and technology. A number of these offer programmes in languages, either as diploma or as full degree courses. Such courses are often non-traditional, in the sense that they do not focus on literature or the arts, but rather combine Spanish with business, economics, law and so on. It has to be said that Spanish remains well behind French and German in numbers of students taking such combinations.

An indication of recent trends in student numbers taking Spanish is provided by the following statistics (2005 is the latest year available, but the trend is likely to have continued). It should be mentioned that the university figures parallel those for the secondary sector, in that the overall percentage of students taking a foreign language is declining slowly. Spanish goes against the trend, but again from a low base (numbers taking Spanish at Third Level): (6)

	2002	**2005**	**Trend**
Universities	2,295	2,456	+7.0 per cent
Institutes of Technology	1,284	1,394	+8.5 per cent

Several hundred students graduate with degrees in Spanish every year. No effort has been made to systematically evaluate the proficiency of those who graduate with a degree in the language in Ireland. Impressionistically, it can be stated that there is a wide range of ability. Some graduates are truly excellent, many are adequate, while some exhibit serious deficiencies in their command of the language. (The same formulation would apply to Irish teachers of Spanish).

Undergraduate students have opportunities to spend significant time in Spain. They can either do this through the long-running Socrates (formerly Erasmus) programme, which permits study at a European university, or by availing of opportunities to serve as English Language teachers in Spanish schools, especially in programmes run by the Spanish Ministerio de Educación. Those students who have availed of the opportunity to spend some time in a Spanish-speaking country not surprisingly tend to be well ahead of those who have not. The Spanish government makes available opportunities for Irish teachers of Spanish to take summer courses in language and pedagogy in Spain, but teachers often claim that family commitments make it difficult to participate in

these schemes. There appear to be no structured opportunities for students or teachers to study or gain work experience in Latin America.

No statistical information is available as to the careers that holders of a degree in Spanish follow. Anecdotal evidence, however, shows that a number of them enter the teaching profession in Ireland. These tend to be academically strong students, since entry standards for the teaching profession have become ever higher, but not necessarily those with the best command of the spoken language. A large group of students find jobs in public administration and the civil service, while another large cohort decide to go to Spain or Latin America after graduation and become impossible to track. There are always a few who pursue graduate studies in Spanish or cognate areas, though very few proceed as far as Ph.D. level.

Ireland shares the British tradition of predominantly employing native English speakers for faculty positions in departments of Spanish. This results in departments in which the only native speakers of Spanish are employed at junior levels, often part-timers or temporary instructors of language. Positions in Spanish tend to be advertised only in Ireland and Britain, and academics at British universities play a key part on Irish interview boards.

Despite the huge numbers working in Spanish language, literature and linguistics at the universities of the United States, Irish departments of Spanish continue to look to Britain rather than to the USA or the Spanish-speaking world. The low number of native speakers of Spanish in key positions in Irish departments of Spanish is undesirable, and impossible to justify. Though most of the university faculty members in these departments exhibit very high proficiency in the language, there is a tradition of advanced courses in literature or culture being given through the medium of English. This practice probably adds little to students' proficiency in Spanish, and was recently criticised in a report of the European Union. (7)

Conclusions

This is not the place to attempt a history of Irish Hispanism, but it is perhaps appropriate to allude to the fact that Ireland has a rich tradition in Hispanic Studies. This sets it apart from the large number of European countries where no such tradition exists. In the nineteenth century the Irish poet Denis McCarthy became internationally renowned for his translations of Calderón de la Barca. In the twentieth century, the first holder of the Professorship of Spanish at Trinity College was the colourful character Walter Starkie, a famous translator of *Don Quixote*. It may be mentioned in passing that part of *Don Quixote* has been translated to Irish. (8)

More recently, a graduate of Trinity College, Ian Gibson, published widely admired biographies of García Lorca and Salvador Dalí. Spanish has deep roots in Ireland. As has been seen, the language has enjoyed a modest – though not enormous - improvement in its place in the Irish educational system in the past few years. Outside the formal system, Spanish is quite strong in what might be termed the adult education sector, namely voluntary courses offered to people who have no other motive but their interest in the subject. These are available throughout the country, often as evening classes. In Dublin the Instituto Cervantes also offers a wide range of courses in Spanish. (9) The courses have been so popular that some time ago the institute had to move to larger premises in Dublin.

Outside the schools and colleges, Spain continues to attract large numbers of Irish holiday-makers, an increasing number of whom are more interested in the culture, food and wine of Spain than merely lying on a beach. Tens of thousands of Irish people have also purchased properties in Spain, especially on the Costa del Sol and to the south of Alicante. Several courses have been established to teach these people elements of the language, culture and legal system of Spain. Spain enjoys a generally positive perception among Irish people; one perhaps trivial piece of evidence is that since Ireland was not participating in the finals of the European Nations Cup in football

this year, a radio station ran a poll asking which country Irish people should support. Spain won easily. Add to this the increasing *Latino* element in United States popular culture, a culture that dominates Ireland, and it can be seen that Spanish enjoys advantages over other foreign languages in eliciting positive attitudes among Irish people.

Of course the generally favourable attitude to Spain does not guarantee the language any prominence in the life and culture of Ireland. Irish newspapers are notoriously monolingual, with few even offering a column in Irish. Articles in foreign languages are never carried. With the exception of the Irish language television channel TG4, television stations in Ireland are equally monolingual, and rarely show material in foreign languages. On very rare occasions a Spanish language movie with subtitles will be carried on Irish television. Other than this, there is no Spanish presence in the media, be it written or electronic. Whatever profile Spanish enjoys in the popular culture, much of it is due to a significant extent to the increasing role of Spanish in the culture of the United States.

The cultural organisation of the Spanish State, the Instituto Cervantes, also puts on regular programmes of lectures in Spanish or about elements of Hispanic culture, while each year a festival of Spanish cinema is held in Dublin. Apart from Spain, four Spanish-speaking countries maintain embassies in Dublin: Argentina, Chile, Cuba and Mexico. These maintain a relatively low profile with regard to promoting the Spanish language or sponsoring cultural events.

There was fairly significant immigration from Spain to Ireland in the 1990s, mostly comprising women. This immigration appears to have levelled off somewhat in the current decade. In any case, the census of 2006 reported that slightly over 6,000 Spaniards are resident in Ireland, the great majority of these in the 25-44 age group. (10) It might be pointed out that this number is less than one-tenth of that for citizens of Poland. No figures are available for nationals of other Spanish-speaking countries, but they are undoubtedly smaller than those for Spanish.

The numbers and the age group of Spaniards suggest that many of these people would be married, either to fellow Spaniards or Irish citizens. This raises the question of language maintenance among their children - do Spaniards living in Ireland make any attempt to educate their children in Spanish? As far as can be seen, no provisions have been made by the Embassy of Spain or the Instituto Cervantes to promote the maintenance of Spanish among children of Spanish people in Ireland.

The issue of language maintenance in general will become a pressing one in Ireland in the coming years. The country has experienced significant and virtually unplanned immigration, to the point where non-Irish nationals now make up some 11.5 per cent of the population. The demands that some of these people may make for language provision for their children, both in English and in their origin languages, look certain to place great strains on the Irish educational system. Parents such as some Poles or Latvians may ask that their children be exempted from learning Irish, so that they may use their time in studying the language of their country of origin. Further, parents may prefer that their children study their own native language rather than the foreign languages available in the Irish schools, Polish rather than Spanish, for example. There are now over 100 languages spoken in Ireland, and we can scarcely guess at the complex issues and linguistic debates that may arise in the future.

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Notes

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