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Language Planning, Education, and Linguistic Identity in the Republic of Ireland

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Language Planning, Education, and Linguistic Identity in the Republic of Ireland

Education has been a critical tool for state-building and the intergenerational transmittance of culture for as long as "culture" and "the state" have existed in the collective consciousness of our species. To instill in young people a sense of collective identity and loyalty outside of their immediate communities, state-led consolidation of learning is an invaluable tool in creating an intimate community among millions. In the uncertain first years of the Irish Free State, the makers of educational policy were well aware of this, and paid special attention to the educational domain as a means to repair and revive the Irish identity after hundreds of years of brutal subjugation from British colonial rule¹. To many of the first political leaders of the Republic, the Irish language was an inseparable part of the Irish culture and identity they sought to revive². Due in large part to the political influence of Conradh na Gaeilge,³ the free Irish state began an unprecedented campaign to "Gaelicize" a new generation of Irish youth through the education system⁴. In pursuit of this vision, they leaned heavily on teachers and students, hoping that children moving through the education system would naturally form new communities of

¹ Pháidín, Nic Caoilfhionn, and Seán Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*. Dublin: Cois Life, 2008.

² Ó Buachalla, Seamas. "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981." *European Journal of Education* 19, no. 1 (1984): 75.

³ Translates to "The Gaelic League"

⁴ Ibid

Irish speakers⁵. In light of modern theories of sociolinguistics and behavioral science, the flaws in early Irish educational policy are clear to see. Early revivalist policy operated under the mistaken assumption that educational proficiency alone would lead to the creation of new speech communities and Irish language networks⁶. **However, the reality is that even the best language education is not enough to secure the lived status of a minority language without simultaneously creating and enacting policies for the speech communities themselves⁷. In Ireland's case, the ineffectiveness of educational reform alone can be observed in the current decline of Irish in state-protected historical Irish communities and the parallel growth of proficient speakers learning Irish as a second language through Irish medium education⁸.**

The continued use of Irish, similar to many minority languages around the world, wavers under the economic and social pressure to speak English in the face of globalization⁹. Even with the recent gains in knowledge about best pedagogical practice and language maintenance, the use of Irish as a *community language*, that is, a language utilized permanently by an established social network, is capitulating to the influence of English¹⁰. For decades, it has been observed by language activists and government agencies that the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht is declining¹¹. Even though millions of children learn Irish in school and a good number, especially in Irish immersion education, become proficient, the language shift towards English has been steadily

⁵ Walsh, John. *One Hundred Years of Irish Language Policy, 1922-2022*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Central Statistics Office; Education and Irish Language, Census of Population 2022; *CSO statistical publication, 30 May 2023, 11am*.

⁹ Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

¹⁰ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

¹¹ Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

encroaching into Gaeltacht areas¹². From a language preservation perspective, this is extremely troubling. Gaeltacht areas not only host the remaining communities that speak Irish as a social, living language, but also produce speakers of historical Irish dialects of Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. Although it is possible for L2¹³ Irish learners to learn a dialect, it is quite challenging, especially considering there is a "standard" form of Irish that is taught in most schools¹⁴.

Although Gaeltacht Irish speakers make up a minority percentage of current Irish speakers, the survival of their communities is of utmost importance to the overall future of the language¹⁵.

Therefore, the challenge of any policy seeking to ensure the vitality of the Irish language must pay attention to the unique needs of L2 speakers in educational contexts *and* speakers in the Gaeltacht.

To comprehend the policy needs of a language, it is vital to gather accurate demographic and statistical information about a given speech community. To that aim, I will briefly summarize certain items from the most recent Irish national population census of 2022. Below are some of the key results of the 2022 census that begin to reveal the linguistic reality of Irish in the Republic of Ireland:

- 1,873,997 total speakers, up 6% from 2016 census¹⁶
- 623,961 spoke Irish daily within and outside the education system. This accounts for 33%

¹² Coughlan, Eileen. "Accommodation or Rejection? Teenagers' Experiences of Tensions between Traditional and New Speakers of Irish." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 25, no. 1 (2021): 44–61.

¹³ second-language

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ó Giollagáin, Conchúr, *Staidéar cuimsitheach teangeolaíoch ar úsáid na gaeilge sa ghaeltacht: Príomhthátaí agus moltaí*. = comprehensive linguistic study of the use of Irish in the gaeltacht: Principal findings and recommendations § (2007).

¹⁶ Central Statistics Office; Education and Irish Language, *Census of Population 2022; CSO statistical publication, 30 May 2023, 11am*.

of the Irish speaking population, compared with 36% in 2016.¹⁷

- 71,968 of the daily speakers used Irish outside the education system, a fall of 1,835 on the 2016 figure.¹⁸
- Among those who could speak Irish, one in four (472,887) indicated that they never spoke the language.¹⁹

Let's take a moment to analyze some of these statistics. The population of the Republic of Ireland is a little over five million.²⁰ Of that population, almost 2 million indicated they had some Irish.²¹ If you were to take this statistic on its own without considering any other factors, Irish would seem to be doing extremely well when compared to other minority languages around the world. However, a small fraction of those speakers use Irish outside of the classroom, and that number is falling.²² Furthermore, a quarter of all speakers indicate that they never use the language. This number is likely comprised mostly of those who learned Irish in school and never used it again.²³ The fact that schools are responsible for the relatively high (when compared to other minority languages) number of speakers but has failed to make a significant dent in falling levels of daily speakers outside the home speaks to a fundamental and unique paradox in Irish-language policy that it is vital to address.

The 2022 Census was unique in that it added a series of questions assessing the self-

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

reported *ability* of respondents, marking the first time the census has ever asked this.²⁴

- Of the 1,873,997 Irish speakers, 10% spoke the language very well with a further 32% speaking it well.²⁵
- 55% of people who indicated that they spoke Irish did not speak the language well.²⁶
- 63% of people aged between 15 and 19 who spoke Irish reported that they spoke it either very well or well.²⁷
- 27% of the Irish speakers aged 50 to 54 recorded that they spoke Irish either very well or well.²⁸

These statistics also show the outsized, but incomplete and domain-restricted, role that the education sector has in maintaining the language. The group that feels they speak Irish the best are those older youth still in school or recently graduated.²⁹ The fact that this percentage drops in the 50-54 age range speaks to the concerning reality that Irish education does not create lifelong Irish speakers for the majority of students.³⁰ It should also be noted that almost every child is required to take Irish throughout their education.³¹ The fact that such a small number feel they speak it well suggests that there are significant flaws in the way Irish is instructed for most students.

²⁴ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

²⁵ Central Statistics Office; Education and Irish Language, Census of Population 2022; *CSO statistical publication*, 30 May 2023, 11am.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ McAdory, Sara E., and Jan Germen Janmaat. "Trends in Irish-Medium Education in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland since 1920: Shifting Agents and Explanations." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 36, no. 5

Before delving into the specifics of language policy in these communities, it is important to understand the history of both the English and Irish language on the island as well as the reality of its current status. Some form of Gaelic has been spoken on the island for millenia.³² Irish was spoken monolingually by most inhabitants until the beginning of the 16th century when England began making significant colonial inroads into the country.³³ Irish gradually went from a language spoken amongst all classes of people to a stratified language spoken by scattered groups across the country with strongholds on the Western Seaboard (some of which still exist today as Gaeltacht communities).³⁴ The East of Ireland, which includes Dublin city, was a bastion of Anglicization since the beginning of the English conquest that slowly spread to other areas of the Island.³⁵ Despite the pressures of anglicization, there remained a substantial amount of monolingual Irish speakers up to the 1830's prior to the Potato famine, which dealt an unprecedented blow to these speech communities, either through migration or death.³⁶ It's estimated that around one million died from famine and disease, and a further million emigrated to escape the devastation, and entire communities of speakers were wiped off the map.³⁷ The language also suffered from the policy decisions of the colonial British government.³⁸ There was no attempt to provide public services or education through Irish, even for the small remaining monolingual speech communities in the Gaeltacht.³⁹ National education was provided through English, and educators regarded Irish with degrees of ambivalence at best to outright revulsion at

³² Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

³³ GIBNEY, J. (2019). *Short history of Ireland, 1500-2000*. YALE University Press.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ó Duibhir, P. (2018). *Immersion Education: Lessons from a Minority Language Context* (Ser. Bilingual Education and Bilingualism). Bristol; Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ó Buachalla, Seamas. "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981." *European Journal of Education* 19, no. 1 (1984): 75.

³⁹ Ibid

worst.⁴⁰ To fight this marginalization of Irish, there were a great number of concerned Irish citizens who formed active resistance to the trend of anglicization, many of whose efforts had significant overlap with the burgeoning Irish independence movement at the time.⁴¹

From the late 1800's to the independence from Britain in 1922, there was an explosion of language activism.⁴² The most notable and expansive organization was Conradh na Gaeilge, which lobbied the National Commission of Education for more Irish programs in national primary schools, created independent programs for adult learners, and was a critical force in the 1917 rising, which was a prelude to Ireland's eventual independence.⁴³ When the first independent government was established in 1922, there were a number of Conradh na Gaeilge members and sympathizers appointed to legislative positions.⁴⁴ As the new free republic turned its attention to educational reform, Conradh na Gaeilge was able to see the realization of many of the policies that foundered under a British-led education system.⁴⁵ What followed was a radical and sweeping program of Irish education, mostly established in primary schools.⁴⁶ The ultimate goal of the State was to establish full immersion for younger students and encourage full immersion for older students wherever possible, gradually replacing English medium instruction with Irish medium instruction as more teachers were trained to teach proficiently in Irish.⁴⁷ Although many secondary schools⁴⁸ were privately operated at the time, they too were influenced by Revivalist policies when Irish was made a requirement on the leaving certificate,

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ GIBNEY, J. (2019). *Short history of Ireland*

⁴⁵ Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language.*

⁴⁶ Relatively equivalent to American elementary schools in age ranges

⁴⁷ Ó Buachalla, Seamas. "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981."

⁴⁸ Equivalent to middle and high school

which meant Secondary school students must have proficiency in Irish to matriculate into University (Source). Irish was also a requirement for many government and public service positions, which further expanded the necessity for students to learn Irish.⁴⁹ These policies were all reflective of the new government's belief that supporting Irish in the education and the professional sectors under its control would be sufficient measures to counteract the language shift towards English occurring in all speech domains.⁵⁰

Ultimately, these early revival policies weren't entirely futile. The legacy of mandatory Irish in education and in public service continues to this day, and is the reason why there is a large number of speakers outside of the Gaeltacht.⁵¹ However, the state nonetheless made significant errors in early revival policies. Firstly, the standard of teaching in many Irish learning contexts did not always lead to confidence in speaking.⁵² The standard at the time was to begin with oral Irish in early years of primary school and gradually transition to more and more emphasis on written Irish.⁵³ This lack of conversational Irish education did not set the groundwork for the creation of social Irish communities like the kind that exist in the Gaeltacht.⁵⁴ The other major issue with the state's focus on education is that there was no encouragement of or provision for students to speak Irish outside of the education system.⁵⁵ In recent years of language revival policy that is informed by sociolinguistics and a century of practical experience, a critical aspect of language planning is holding community events though

⁴⁹ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

⁵² Coady, Maria, and Muiris Ó Laoire. "MISMATCHES IN LANGUAGE POLICY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATION: THE CASE OF GAELSCOILEANNA IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND." *Language Policy: Kluwer Academic Publishers* 1 (2002): 143–58.

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

⁵⁵ Ibid

Irish in the hopes that social bonds between speakers can be cemented and eventually passed on to others.⁵⁶ Without the intentional creation of social spaces where Irish can be spoken, the Irish learned in the classroom, even for the most proficient of students, often won't go much further than the domain of education.⁵⁷ Of course, the early Irish state did not have the access to the sociolinguistic knowledge that is now available, so it is perhaps unlikely that any intervention from a relatively uninformed perspective would have made a significant difference in the fate of the Irish language. The state also relied heavily on raising Irish to a symbolic and prestigious status in civil life, perhaps to the detriment of actually securing the vitality of real-life speaking communities.⁵⁸ The Gaeltacht has often been praised and heralded as a bastion of Irish language and traditional culture, but very little real policy, resources, or even attention was paid to securing the endurance of these unique communities when compared to the resources and attention paid to Irish in domains of education.⁵⁹

There was also a general underestimation of how long it takes for linguistic changes to become evident.⁶⁰ The state simply didn't have the patience for sustaining revival policies that weren't having an immediate effect, especially in light of a government change in the 1950s. There was significant pressure from parents and teachers who were dissatisfied with the quality of Irish education.⁶¹ It seemed that for many students, Irish was not a particularly enjoyable part of their education, especially given the limited opportunities to take it beyond teaching and the

⁵⁶ Blum-Martinez, Rebecca, Pamela A. Bunte, Laura A. Buszard-Welcher, Colleen Cotter, Fermio Jessie Little Doe, Leanne Hinton, Kenneth L. Hale, Robert D. Arnold, Marie Arviso, and Anna Ash. *The Green Book of Language Revitalization*. San Diego: Academic Press, 2001.

⁵⁷ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

occasional formal occasion in an occupational setting.⁶² All these factors led to the state easing the revivalist policies of the past three decades.⁶³ Irish was still a mandatory subject, but it was made an optional element of the leaving certificate, which significantly lowered the stakes for students wishing to attend University.⁶⁴ Standards for teacher Irish were also lowered, and it was taught for less hours of the day.⁶⁵ Evidently, the urgency to reverse anglicization in the interest of reasserting Irish identity against 700 years of British rule capitulated to the economic and political realities of the latter half of the 20th century.⁶⁶ The State also gradually let go of the idea that anglicization could be reversed, and began treating existing Irish communities as bilingual entities and adjusted their policies accordingly.⁶⁷

Now, let us turn our attention to the specifics of the Gaeltacht communities. The state first drew the modern Gaeltacht boundaries in the revivalist era shortly after independence.⁶⁸ The state was ambitious and optimistic in its drawing of the Gaeltacht boundaries, and many scholars point out that many areas were included in the Gaeltacht that were, even at that time, primarily English-speaking.⁶⁹ The state further divided the Gaeltacht into two categories: Breac Gaeltacht and Fíor Gaeltacht – the former term (meaning "speckled-Gaeltacht" in Irish), referring to Irish communities more mixed with English speakers, and the latter (meaning "true-Gaeltacht") reflecting areas with the highest concentration of Irish speakers.⁷⁰ Early on, there were some

⁶² Coady, Maria, and Muiris Ó Laoire . “MISMATCHES IN LANGUAGE POLICY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATION: THE CASE OF GAELSCOILEANNA IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND.”

⁶³ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

⁶⁷ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid

efforts to establish governmental agencies and policy specifically for these areas.⁷¹ However, these efforts tended to gear towards the economic development side of things rather than being specifically attuned to language preservation.⁷² Even with attempts at economically lifting up Gaeltacht communities, these areas saw vast migration of its members into cities for better prospects.⁷³ Those that returned, even if they grew up speaking Irish, didn't necessarily raise their children through Irish, as many returned with partners who had no Irish ability, and many parents feared they would put their children at a disadvantage raising them through Irish instead of the dominant language.⁷⁴ These patterns of migration, along with the lack of dedicated language planning initiatives, has led to the current declines in Irish spoken in Gaeltacht areas.

After delving into the historical and sociopolitical dimension of Irish language policy, it's useful to contextualize that history by exploring theoretical frameworks of effective language planning:

One model I researched is from the *Green Book of Language Revitalization*, in which language planning is conceptualized as a community driven process that takes place in three open ended, non-linear stages.⁷⁵ The first stage is when the community comes together to make goals.⁷⁶ Oftentimes, this looks like the formation of some sort of local committee.⁷⁷ Here, representatives from the community consider the current status of their language, how they would like to see it change in the future, and the revitalization tools and practices that can help

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Blum-Martinez, Rebecca, Pamela A. Bunte, Laura A. Buszard-Welcher, Colleen Cotter, Fermine Jessie Little Doe, Leanne Hinton, Kenneth L. Hale, Robert D. Arnold, Marie Arviso, and Anna Ash. *The Green Book of Language Revitalization*. San Diego: Academic Press, 2001.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

them achieve that vision.⁷⁸ The second stage comprises the implementation of these identified practices to help achieve their linguistic goals.⁷⁹ Step three is the evaluation of whether these policies are working.⁸⁰ These language planning stages can occur out of order, concurrently, and in collaboration with one another, and the process will look different for every speech community.⁸¹ Irish is in a unique position when compared to many minority languages because some of the earliest language planning for Irish didn't come from the community, but from the state itself.⁸² Therefore, any community-driven Language Planning initiative must contend with existing state policies, which can be helpful or hindering depending on the situation.

A paper entitled "Minority Language Protection and Promotion" by Brian Ó Curnáin and Conchúr Ó Giollagáin⁸³ offers another theory of language planning that is derived from Joshua Fishman's 1991 work *Reversing Language Shift*.⁸⁴ He devised a model called the GIDS scale, or "Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale," which evaluates the vitality and strength of languages based on factors such as absolute number of speakers, rate of intergenerational transmission, domains of language use, and political status.⁸⁵ It runs from a 0-13 scale. 0 represents "global" languages like English that are globally widespread and in absolutely no danger of not being actively spoken.⁸⁶ These are classified as "safe."⁸⁷ The third point on the

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ó Buachalla, Seamas. "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981."

⁸³ Ó Curnáin, B., & Ó Giollagáin, C. (2023). Minority Language Protection and Promotion . *The Routledge Handbook of Language Policy and Planning*, 396–413.

⁸⁴ Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift*. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800418097>

⁸⁵ Ó Curnáin, B., & Ó Giollagáin, C. (2023). Minority Language Protection and Promotion . *The Routledge Handbook of Language Policy and Planning*, 396–413.

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

scale, also deemed "safe," represents "national" languages, which aren't necessarily transcending borders, but they are spoken by a majority group within a nation and used in all domains there.⁸⁸ The bottom end of the scale includes languages that are moribund, or not spoken by any living speakers.⁸⁹ When it comes to classifying Irish according to the GIDS scale, it's a bit complicated.⁹⁰ Point six on the scale describes languages that are "in vigorous use, with standardization and literature sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education".⁹¹ This certainly describes the growth of the Irish medium educational domain and the existing mandatory Irish that is required in public education. Point six is also classified as a "safe" status.⁹² However, the struggles the Gaeltacht currently faces would put Irish at a point 6b on the scale, which describes languages that have "face to face communication within all generations but is losing users."⁹³ Point 6b languages are classified as "vulnerable" by the GIDS scale.⁹⁴ Clearly, the complex interdynamics and diversity of the Irish speaking community make simple classification an impossibility. While models for language planning are undoubtedly useful tools for formulating policy, you can't use them to paint a uniform picture of the socio-political complexities of Irish.

Now that there's been discussion of the history of Irish education and how it fits into language planning models, it's time for a closer look at how students experience Irish in the education system. There are three main ways in which Irish students encounter the language in

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

school – through English-medium education (EME), through Irish-medium education (IME), and through official Gaeltacht schools.

Ninety percent of students learn Irish in an English-medium education context.⁹⁵ This means that Irish is taught similarly to how a foreign language like Spanish or French might be taught in the United States. There have been recently documented declines in student performance across all grade levels.⁹⁶ It's been widely acknowledged that students in EME contexts are unenthusiastic and unmotivated to learn Irish, many teachers are uninspired to teach it, and standards of instruction and performance are falling.⁹⁷ Teachers often feel out of their depth in teaching students who don't always feel motivated to learn the language.⁹⁸ There is also no real opportunity to speak Irish outside of school, which further compounds the lack of effort students put into Irish classes.⁹⁹ The state has also cut the time spent learning Irish significantly in recent decades, which has further exacerbated the country-wide decline in student-proficiency in English-medium schools.¹⁰⁰ While there are specific pedagogical interventions that have shown promise in early studies, the general picture of mandatory Irish for the majority of Irish students is not the most promising in the fight to maintain and revive the Irish language.

A small, but rapidly growing, percentage of students learn Irish in Irish Medium Education contexts, henceforth referred to as IME schools, meaning all subjects with the

⁹⁵ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

⁹⁶ O'Toole, Jane. "Identifying Creative and Participatory Approaches to Respond to Existing Challenges for Irish Language Teaching and Learning at English-Medium Primary School Level." *Irish Educational Studies* 42, no. 4 (2023): 599–616.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*

⁹⁸ Grádaigh, Seán. "Who Are Qualified to Teach in Second-Level Irish-Medium Schools?" *Irish Educational Studies* 34, no. 2 (2015): 165–82.

⁹⁹ Hickey, Tina M., and Nancy Stenson. "One Step Forward and Two Steps Back in Teaching an Endangered Language? Revisiting L2 Reading in Irish." *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 29, no. 3 (2016): 302–18.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*

exception of English language arts are taught through Irish.¹⁰¹ After many of the state-funded IME programs were shut down in the 50s and 60s, there was a grassroots movement of parents who wanted their children to receive a high-quality all-Irish education.¹⁰² These schools are different from the first attempts at revival schools in that oftentimes families have direct stakes in their creation and upkeep, and the schools are obviously wanted by communities, rather than foisted upon them by the state.¹⁰³ Students in IME schools show far more proficiency in Irish than their peers in EME education.¹⁰⁴ However, there is concern that the spoken Irish of these students is unduly influenced by English.¹⁰⁵ IME students often produce speech that is classified as an "interlanguage," otherwise known as a language that falls somewhere between a speaker's first language (in this case, English) and their second language (Irish). Without intervention, it's possible for interlanguage to become a permanent fixture of the student's speech in a process known as "fossilization," which makes it difficult to fully acquire Irish as a second language.¹⁰⁶ It has also been observed that IME students' perception and understanding capabilities far outweigh their ability to produce accurate speech.¹⁰⁷ IME students also face similar struggles to their English-medium peers in that there is a lack of opportunity to speak Irish outside of the classroom, which undermines the potential for IME schools to promote the vitality of the Irish

¹⁰¹ Ó Duibhir, P. (2018). *Immersion Education: Lessons from a Minority Language Context* (Ser. Bilingual Education and Bilingualism). Bristol; Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

¹⁰⁴ Ó Duibhir, P. (2018). *Immersion Education: Lessons from a Minority Language Context* (Ser. Bilingual Education and Bilingualism). Bristol; Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

language in domains other than education.¹⁰⁸

Lastly, Irish is learned in schools that fall within the official Gaeltacht boundaries. Due to the mixed linguistic background of the Gaeltacht, there is also mixed linguistic instruction in the schools.¹⁰⁹ That is, not all teach through Irish despite being in an officially sanctioned Irish-speaking area. A little over seventy percent of schools teach through Irish.¹¹⁰ Although this majority figure is promising, there has been a documented shift in Irish children and teenagers' language ability and choices.¹¹¹ Gaeltacht students, even native speakers, overwhelmingly choose to socialize with one another in English. Even those students who might otherwise speak Irish with one another tend to revert to English to accommodate peers who do not have a similarly fluent Irish ability.¹¹² Furthermore, even students who grew up speaking Irish fail to meet standards for Irish proficiency.¹¹³ It's clear that the aforementioned issues with intergenerational transmission and encroachment of English are negatively affecting the linguistic reality of Gaeltacht youth. This is troubling for the longevity of Gaeltacht Irish because its fate is dependent on future generations passing it on to their children.¹¹⁴ If young people struggle to speak it amongst themselves, this indicates that there must be measures taken not only

¹⁰⁸ Batardière, Marie-Thérèse, Sarah Berthaud, Bronagh Ćatibušić, and Colin J. Flynn. "Language Teaching and Learning in Ireland: 2012–2021." *Language Teaching* 56, no. 1 (2022): 41–72.

¹⁰⁹ Coughlan, Eileen. "Accommodation or Rejection? Teenagers' Experiences of Tensions between Traditional and New Speakers of Irish." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 25, no. 1 (2021): 44–61.

¹¹⁰ Ó Duibhir, P. (2018). *Immersion Education: Lessons from a Minority Language Context* (Ser. Bilingual Education and Bilingualism). Bristol; Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

¹¹¹ Coughlan, Eileen. "Accommodation or Rejection? Teenagers' Experiences of Tensions between Traditional and New Speakers of Irish." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 25, no. 1 (2021): 44–61.

¹¹² Nic Caoilfhionn and Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Walsh, *100 Years of Irish Language Policy*

to increase Gaeltacht students' confidence in their Irish ability, but also encourage them to choose Irish as a vehicle for socialization. It should be noted here that some level of linguistic change is natural, and that policies aimed towards younger Gaeltacht speakers should not be focused on prescriptivist ideas that they ought to speak *exactly* as older generations do. Indeed, even languages that aren't pressured by a dominant language change a great deal from generation to generation. However, the fact that Gaeltacht youth feel uncomfortable speaking Irish and prefer English is troubling, and every effort should be made to support Gaeltacht youth in developing the skills and confidence necessary to speak Irish as easily as English.

Now that we've discussed some challenges that students face learning Irish in three educational contexts, it's time to move onto potential solutions. Regarding some of the issues Irish Medium students face in developing proficiency in spoken Irish and overcoming undue English influence, there are two promising solutions that were most prescient in my research. One is called Content and Meaning Based Learning, or CLIL. The basis of this method is that it's not enough to simply teach regular school subjects through Irish and expect students to implicitly pick up on grammar rules, nor is it enough to have the occasional grammatical lesson in the midst of majority-content instruction.¹¹⁵ It's essential that form and content based instruction be integrated.¹¹⁶ Students should learn grammar rules in a way that is directly relevant to the content that they are learning¹¹⁷. Another potential solution is something called Explicit-

¹¹⁵ Mac Gearailt, Breandán, Gerry Mac Ruairc, and Clíona Murray. "ACTUALISING Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Irish-Medium Education; Why, How and Why Now?" *Irish Educational Studies* 42, no. 1 (2021): 39–57.

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

Inductive Form-Focused Instruction.¹¹⁸ This is similar to CLIL in that students are asked to focus their attention on form, rather than just content.¹¹⁹ In an explicit-inductive approach to learning, students are shown a grammatical process without it being explicitly explained to them in the beginning, and are then tasked with trying to decipher it themselves through peer discussion and journaling.¹²⁰ The teacher steps in when necessary to give explicit guidance about the form-based content.¹²¹ This really seems to empower students to take learning into their own hands, and some studies show that it improves understanding and production of Irish grammar rules.¹²² These pedagogical methods might also be applicable to Gaeltacht students who are struggling to meet certain benchmarks in Irish proficiency, although it would likely need to be altered to meet the unique needs of L1¹²³, rather than L2, speakers of Irish. They could also likely be applied in EME Irish instruction as well.

Another solution to be explored for EME and IME students is the expansion of extracurricular activities that allow them to experience Irish outside of the educational domain.¹²⁴ Students ultimately need more chances to speak Irish outside of the classroom in order to counteract the trend of the percentage of proficient speakers declining with age as shown in the 2022 census. Revivalist policies of the past show that students will not automatically speak Irish socially even with the best quality of Irish education. The spaces for social Irish must be made

¹¹⁸ Ní Dhiorbháin, Aisling, and Pádraig Ó Duibhir. “An Explicit-Inductive Approach to Grammar in Irish-Medium Immersion Schools.” *Language Awareness* 26, no. 1 (2016): 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2016.1261870>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ First language

¹²⁴ Pháidín, Nic Caoilfhionn, and Seán Ó Cearnaigh. *A new view of the Irish language*.

for them.

Parent involvement in Irish education can also improve learner outcomes for EME and IME students: there was a study conducted by researcher Jane O'Toole for EME students of Irish where they were instructed to “teach” their parents the Irish that they learned in the classroom.¹²⁵ Even this simple intervention led to an increase in engagement and performance from students.¹²⁶ The fact that even this simple level of involvement from parents might lead to better student outcomes is interesting, and it begs the question of what would happen if that involvement was taken even further. For instance, perhaps the expansion of adult Irish classes designed for parents of Irish students might be a promising solution. Perhaps if parents are given the tools to empower their children’s learning, students might be able to succeed even in EME education. In fact, the success of IME education is often attributed to the fact that parents are so involved in the creation and maintenance of those schools, so maybe more parent involvement might also improve learner outcomes for Irish in English medium schools.¹²⁷

The last solution discussed here is perhaps the most important for the future of Irish as a community language. Families with one or more parents who speak Irish should be encouraged to raise their children through Irish and introduce the language into the home.¹²⁸ Research in bilingual language acquisition suggests that in contexts where one language is significantly

¹²⁵ O’Toole, Jane. “Identifying Creative and Participatory Approaches to Respond to Existing Challenges for Irish Language Teaching and Learning at English-Medium Primary School Level.” *Irish Educational Studies* 42, no. 4 (2023): 599–616.

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ó Duibhir, P. (2018). *Immersion Education: Lessons from a Minority Language Context* (Ser. Bilingual Education and Bilingualism). Bristol; Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

¹²⁸ Ó Giollagáin, C., Mac Donnacha, S., Ní Chualáin, F., Ní Shéaghda, A., & O’Brian, M. (2007). (rep.). *Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht*. Dublin : Brunswick Press.

dominant over another, children will easily acquire the dominant language even if they are raised mostly in their minority language.¹²⁹ Meaning, if families are capable of raising their children through Irish, they ought to prioritize speaking Irish to their children whenever possible.¹³⁰ There are a lot of misconceptions that raising a child in a minority language even part time will hinder their acquisition of the dominant language, so there should be educational resources made available to parents about what raising a child through Irish looks like in reality.¹³¹ This becomes especially important for young Gaeltacht parents, whose linguistic choices in raising their children are instrumental in the survival of the Gaeltacht.¹³² It remains to be seen how the educational policies mentioned above might affect the future of the Gaeltacht. But without ensuring Irish is passed down intergenerationally in Gaeltacht families, the diversity and social nature of the Irish language is in great danger.¹³³

The focus of this paper was to explore the needs of Irish speakers in three educational domains – Irish medium education, English medium education, and Gaeltacht schools. The history of language policy, the current status of speakers, and promising solutions were researched to explore the complexities of the Irish language in education and in the Gaeltacht. The central question of how schools fit into the existing reality of language maintenance and revival remains an omnipresent question even as it has been recognized that schools cannot bear the burden alone. While Irish education will not automatically assist Gaeltacht communities in

¹²⁹ Finghin Mac Cárthaigh. Interview with Póilín Nic Géidigh. *Ceist na Teangan*. Podcast audio. March 13, 2023.

¹³⁰ Ó Giollagáin, C., Mac Donnacha, S., Ní Chualáin, F., Ní Shéaghda, A., & O'Brian, M. (2007). (rep.). *Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht*. Dublin: Brunswick Press.

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid

maintaining their language communities, there is an important connection between the Gaeltacht and the educational sphere that should be explored and utilized to the benefit of both speech communities. Just as it is erroneous to claim that the needs of Gaeltacht speakers and L2 learners in education are the same, it is also overly simplistic to claim that the two communities are entirely disparate. As it stands, the approach to language preservation cannot be uniformly applied to the entire country. Yet although L2 speakers and traditional Gaeltacht communities have different needs that must be honored and catered to, it is also crucial to explore and develop the connection between these groups and investigate why there might be a lack of significant attachment. Gaeltacht communities and learner communities must be evaluated and served independently and codependently regardless of what the future of Irish truly will be. If Irish is to be revived, protected, maintained, and all of the above, there must be community specific *and* unilateral action taken to ensure the vitality of growth of all different types of Irish speakers.

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