

# Reawakening the Irish Language through the Irish Education System: Challenges and Priorities

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## Abstract

As a language, Irish is unique to Ireland and is, therefore, of crucial importance to the identity of the Irish people, to Irish culture and to world heritage. The Irish language however has had a turbulent and traumatic history and has endured a complex and varied relationship with the Irish people. Since the foundation of the Irish Free State, the education system has been targeted as an agency and model for Irish language planning, education and language revitalisation and has had a critical role in generating linguistic ability in the Irish language. This paper reviews the complex and controversial relationship between the Irish language, the State and the education system from an historical perspective. Some key acts of recent legislation and government initiatives, which impact on the status of the Irish language are considered and barriers and challenges to progress in the education system are outlined. The paper concludes with a discussion on significant positive factors which may revolutionise and *reawaken* the Irish language through our education system.

**Keywords:** The Irish language, The Irish Education System, Primary education, Post primary education, Immersion education, Identity, Culture.

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## The Irish Language: The Linguistic Landscape

Irish, or Gaeilge, is an autochthonous (indigenous) language spoken in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. It is a Celtic language closely related to Scottish Gaelic and Manx and more distantly related to Welsh, Breton and Cornish. 'Celtic' or 'Proto-Celtic' is the term linguists apply to the parent-language from which Irish and related languages evolved. Although there is no exact date denoting when the first Celtic speaking tribes invaded Ireland or when Irish eventually overtook the then indigenous languages, it has been postulated that the process commenced around 500 B.C. (Ó Siadhail, 1989; Ó

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hUiginn, 2008). Irish is recorded to be one of the oldest and most historic written languages in the world (Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Government of Ireland, 2010).

The Irish language is the national and first official language of Ireland in accordance with article 8 of the Constitution of Ireland, the other official language being English. Irish is taught as an obligatory subject from primary to Leaving Certificate level in the education system. 3% of people residing in Ireland reported Irish as being their mother tongue in a special Eurobarometer EU survey in 2012, which suggests that the Irish language is the main community and/or household language for this cohort of the population, mainly located in Irish language speech communities or Gaeltachtaí. The 2011 census report suggests that 38.7% of Irish people, aged 3 and over, (1.77 million) speak Irish. However, of the 1.77 million persons, only 1.8% (77,185) indicated that they spoke Irish on a daily basis outside of the education system (Census, 2011). One in four daily speakers (25.4%) were in the school-going ages of 3 to 18. These figures raise searching and significant questions for the future of the Irish language in its cultural and linguistic senses.

#### *The Irish Language: Culture and Identity*

*All research assessments of the language attitudes of Irish people confirm that the Irish language enjoys immense goodwill as the enduring indicator of the unique, distinctive history and identity of Ireland and its people (Ó Flatharta et al., 2009, p.3).*

As a language, Irish is unique to this country and is, therefore, of crucial importance to the identity of the Irish people, to Irish culture and to world heritage. Irish is a vehicle of cultural expression and intangible cultural heritage, essential to identity. Edwards (2009, p. 251) notes that, "The attachment felt by the English-speaking Irish or Welsh to a culture and an ancestry whose language they no longer possess is a psychologically real one, and demonstrates the continuing power of what is intangible and symbolic". The Irish language is a 'symbol of identity' for the majority of the population but it is an 'act of identity' for Irish speakers (Nic Eoin, 2011, p.135). The language is just another symbolic representation in the company of emblems such as the shamrock and the harp for many Irish citizens. It is a 'symbol of identity' which is rolled out at home and abroad on a regular basis, particularly on days such as the Irish national holiday, Saint Patrick's Day, on March 17th. For the minority of the population who speak Irish as their first language on a daily basis, the language is more than a national symbol. It is not only a part of their national and cultural identity but it is part of their own personal identity.

Since the development of the Irish Free State in 1922, Irish society has undergone rapid reform and reconstruction, thereby also reforming and renegotiating Irish culture and identity. Yet, national identity has remained at the heart of justifications for reviving the Irish language. Arguments in support of learning Irish, or of rejuvenating it, tend to be founded on the claim that Irish is an essential element of Irish identity. People learn Irish and support its promotion because of this sense of identity (Watson, 2008, p.74).

Irish identity and its associative links with culture has no doubt influenced the growth in popularity of the Irish language. The Irish language and culture have enjoyed a period of growth in the arts, the media and education, exemplified by increased interest in and access to, literature, the performing arts and music, and by expanded provision for broadcasting and pre-school play groups. The EU's inclusion of the Irish language opens up a new avenue for social mobility due to the need for Irish translators and interpreters. Globalization coupled with the influence of the EU has enabled Irish people to acknowledge that their language, Irish, is a very powerful tool to express one's identity, especially in Europe, and that Ireland has a responsibility for protecting it.

The plight of the Irish language and the role of the language in Irish society have been and still are a constant issue of debate in the media in the Republic of Ireland. Many writings were published on the language question with specific reference to the relationship between the national language and national identity in the 21st century since the beginning of the millennium (Cronin, 2005; Kelly, 2002; Mac Mathúna et al., 2000; Mac Murchaidh, 2004; McCloskey, 2001; Nic Eoin, 2004; 2011; Nic Pháidín & Ó Cearnaigh, 2008; Ó Duibhir et al., 2011). This literature recognises the controversial nature of the language question as it remains to be a topic which evokes a wide range of opinions and emotions amidst the Irish people. This is not surprising when we reflect upon the complicated history of the language in Ireland. Since the foundation of the Irish Free State, the education system has been targeted as an agency and model for language planning, education and language revitalisation and has been viewed as one of “the critical engines for generating linguistic ability” in Irish (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.12). This complex and controversial relationship between the Irish language, the State and the education system will now be considered.

#### *The Irish Language, the State and the Education System: An Historical Perspective*

The role that the Irish language has played within the education system will now be examined from an historical perspective in order to identify the challenges and priorities which must be addressed in our quest to reawaken the national language. We will reflect upon the status and the history of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland to enable us to understand the positioning of the language in the education system in the 21st century. The position of the language changed radically over the years, particularly since the 19th century.

There was a shift in the attitude of the Irish people towards the Irish language during the 19th century when the English language succeeded in gaining the upper hand on the national language. Historical sources show that there were various reasons that the Irish public began to support and favour the English language. It is evident that the Great Famine (1845-49) and the subsequent death and emigration were one of the major factors which added to the decline of Irish. It is reported that there was a decline of two and a half million to the Irish population as a result of the death and emigration during 1846-1851 (Ó Loingsigh, 1975; Wall, 1969). It is of little surprise that the Irish language declined when we consider that the majority of those who emigrated were native Irish speakers because the communities in which the Irish language was still the majority language were the poorest and the most vulnerable communities at the time. It is worth noting that the population of the country had increased at the beginning of the 19th century and it is believed that there were more Irish speakers at the time than ever before, more than four million (Ó Fiannachta, 1974). It is likely that this tragic and devastating event had a negative effect on the speaking of the language because the population that survived the Famine began to look at the language through different eyes. The Irish language became equated with poverty and a lack of power at the time. Not only did the disease of the Famine kill the Irish people but it also killed the language of the people. It is often claimed that it is likely that one in every four people died during the Famine, that another person emigrated and that the spirit of the two left behind was broken (Ó Fiannachta, 1974).

The people of Ireland had a different attitude towards the Irish language after the Famine. The powerful status of the English language attracted the Irish people when the language was presented to them as the language of business, trade and commerce. The English language was associated with power, advancement, wealth, employment and a better future and life. The literature on language issues states that a language is a powerful tool. As Corson (1995, p.1) says, “ ... language is the vehicle for identifying, manipulating and changing power relations between people”. It is clear that power relations were

connected with the shift from the speaking of Irish to English in Ireland in the 19th century.

The Irish language has had a complex and controversial relationship with the education system in Ireland. The Irish people were pressurised as primary students into learning the English language even before the Famine. In addition, the national primary system was established in 1831 and a ban on teaching Irish was introduced. As explained by Ó hUallacháin (1994, p.25), “from the outset, the officially accepted means in the national schools (1831) was to ban all use of Irish among school children and to punish infringement of the ban”. This policy was continued until the end of the 1870s. Corporal punishment was often used on children if they spoke in Irish at school and their teachers were penalised if they taught through the medium of Irish. It is often reported that parents gave their support to this policy, “the parents have never manifested any disposition that their children should cultivate the Irish ... They have energetically demonstrated an anxiety that their children should know English” (Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education – Ireland, 1890). The Irish education system at the time encouraged their students to choose English over Irish if they wanted to be prepared for working life in Ireland or abroad. Corson (1995, p.7) explains the powerful role that education plays in turning a public’s attitude away from one language towards another, “ ... education can routinely repress, dominate, and disempower language users whose practices differ from the norms that it establishes”. It is evident that there was a huge amount of damage inflicted on the Irish language and on the attitudes of the children at the time because they were pressurised into deserting their native language, their national language as well as their home language.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century saw the emergence of a Gaelic revival. Organisations such as The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, The Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association were at the forefront of the renaissance of the Irish language and culture. These organisations put an emphasis on the native language of the country. As stated by Moore (2012, p.27), “... the primary objective of this new movement was to go to the country and get people speaking Irish again”. The Irish language was recognised officially by the education system when the teaching of Irish was placed on the primary and post-primary school programmes in 1878. There was a change in the education system in 1904 when permission was granted for the implementation of bilingual programmes in Irish-speaking areas. It is widely accepted that this decision was one of the most important changes to happen in relation to the Irish language before the foundation of the State in terms of educational policy (Akenson, 1973, p.15). This was the beginning of bilingual education in Ireland.

There was a noticeable change to the role of Irish in the education system when the Free State was founded in 1921. Immersion education was implemented as a compulsory system. The revival of the Irish language was the main objective of the Government’s policy at the time. The English education system which was in effect in Ireland before the foundation of the State was recognised as one of the reasons that the Irish language had declined. The Government wished to re-Gaelicise the country through the education system. As Ó Buachalla (1988, p.345) explains, “The Provisional Government and later the Free State Governments entrusted the Ministry and later the Department of Education with the main responsibility in forwarding what was termed ‘The Gaelicising of Ireland’”. Therefore, the method of immersion education was selected in order to give first place to the Irish language. The infant classes were taught through the medium of Irish and the teachers were required to spend at least one hour on the teaching of Irish in every other class. In 1934, the Department of Education approved the recommendation in the Conference’s Second National Programme that all school teachers would teach through the

medium of Irish in infant classes, as well as teaching History, Geography, Music and Physical Education through Irish in other classes (Shiel et al., 2010, p.1).

The status of the Irish language was also confirmed in the 1937 Irish Constitution:

Article 8.1

The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.

Article 8.2

The English language is recognised as a second official language.

Article 8.3

Provision may, however, be made by law for the exclusive use of either of the said languages for any one or more official purposes, either throughout the State or in any part thereof.

The various Governments continued to emphasise the importance of the Irish language in the education system until 1960 when teachers were granted permission to spend more time on oral Irish instead of teaching through the medium of Irish. A circular (0011/1960) was issued in January 1960 which explained to teachers that they had permission to implement this change if they considered that it would be more beneficial for their students. This was the first twist in language policy since the foundation of the Free State in 1922. Ní Fhearghusa (1998) explains that the number of schools that were teaching through Irish fell drastically in the 1960s to the point there were only 11 primary schools and 5 post-primary schools teaching through the medium of Irish outside of the Irish-speaking regions at the beginning of the 1970s.

The emphasis on oral Irish in the education system continued when there was an end to the Primary Certificate written examination in 1967 and the new Irish language course, *Cúrsaí Comhrá*, for primary schools was implemented in 1969 (Coolahan, 1981). In addition, the Leaving Certificate Irish Oral Examination was introduced in the 1960s. As Coolahan (1981, p.197) explains, "An oral examination in Irish was introduced as part of the Leaving Certificate in 1960, accounting for one-sixth of the allocated marks and later one quarter". It is interesting to note that emphasis was once again placed on the speaking of the Irish language 43 years later when the Leaving Certificate students of 2012 were the first group of students to sit a new examination which awards 40% of the marks for the Oral Examination, 10% for the listening examination and 50% for the written examination (Circular 0042/2007).

It was parents that put the Irish Governments from the 1970s onwards under pressure to establish Irish-medium schools in the country. Ó hAiniféin (2008, p.11) explains that it is a movement founded by parents from the ground up. The growth and development of Irish-medium schools outside of the Irish-speaking regions confirms the positive attitude of the parents of Ireland in relation to the Irish language, to Irish-medium education and to bilingual education. This is a significant change of attitude from the attitude of Irish parents in the 19th century.

The restoration of the Irish language has been a key policy objective of successive governments since the foundation of the State in 1921. As previously mentioned, Article 8 of the present (1937) Constitution designates Irish as the first official language by virtue of its being the national language. The English language is recognised as a "second official language" in the same Article. Faced with the slow but constant decline of the use and transmission of the national language, including in the Gaeltacht (i.e. Irish-speaking regions) areas, where there is an ever-increasing number of non-native speakers of Irish,

the political authorities have engaged a maintenance and revitalisation policy which comprises of different components.

*The Irish Language: Government Priorities and Policies*

From the outset, the Republic of Ireland attempted to halt language loss by declaring Irish its national language in the hope of re-establishing it as the language of everyday communication. No other European state has addressed minority language issues in such a way (Romaine, 2008, p.17). In other words, the Irish language is supported by the state to a degree to which other minority languages are not. In general Irish people support this level of commitment because of the “perceived connection between the Irish language and Irishness” (Watson, 2008, p.74). Some key acts of recent legislation and government initiatives, which impact on the status of the Irish language, will now be reviewed.

*Good Friday Agreement 1998.* In the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, it was stated that a North/South Implementation body be established to promote the Irish language. Foras na Gaeilge, a cross-border, inter-governmental institution was established in 1999 to carry out this task. Foras na Gaeilge’s main work is to facilitate and encourage the speaking and writing of Irish in public and private arenas in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland in accordance with part three of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. This sets out specific measures to promote the use of regional or minority languages in public life.

*Education Act 1998.* The Education Act 1998 contains other important references to the Irish language. It states, for example, that every person involved in the implementation of the Act shall have regard to the following objects: “to contribute to the realisation of national policy and objectives in relation to the extension of bilingualism in Irish society and in particular the achievement of greater use of the Irish language at school and in the community” and “to contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language in Gaeltacht areas” (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 6). Section 31 of the Education Act 1998 sets out the structure for the provision of educational services for the Irish-medium sector and also for the teaching of Irish. An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) was established in 2002 under the provisions of Section 31 of the Education Act 1998. Its functions include:

- the planning and co-ordination of provision of textbooks and teaching resources through Irish;
- advising on promotion of education through Irish in schools generally and in Irish-medium schools;
- providing support services to Irish medium schools; engaging in research. COGG’s website contains a comprehensive directory of resource materials now available to support teaching and learning through Irish.

*The Official Languages Act 2003.* The Official Languages Act 2003 sets out a statutory framework for the provision of public services through the Irish language. A key aspect of the Act is the establishment the office of An Coimisinéir Teanga (Language Commissioner) to monitor and enforce compliance by public bodies with the provisions of the Official Languages Act. The Act guarantees the right of all Irish citizens to communicate with the State in either Irish or English, and provides mechanisms to ensure that this right is respected by public officials. It also provides for the simultaneous publication of important official documents, such as annual reports or policy statement in both languages. The Official Languages Act also makes provision for the designation of official Irish language versions of placenames and the removal of the official status of English placenames in the Gaeltacht.

*Government Statement on the Irish Language 2006.* In 2006 the Irish Government issued a Statement on the Irish Language. Thirteen key objectives were identified in the Statement, each in support of the Irish language and the Gaeltacht. "Preservation as well as promotion and development" of the Irish language is illuminated throughout the Statement (Ó Flatharta, 2007, p.3). The Statement affirms not only the Government's continuing belief in the importance of the language for citizens and residents of Ireland, but also for the vast and dispersed Irish diaspora in many parts of the world.

*Irish as an Official Language of the European Union 2007.* When Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC), now referred to the European Union (EU) on 1 January 1973, Irish acquired a unique status as a treaty language, though not an official working language. Irish was however granted the status of an official and working language of the EU with effect from 1 January 2007. The status of the language was automatically enhanced at EU level not only giving greater attention to the entitlements of Irish-speakers but also creating and enhancing employment opportunities for them across a range of translation and interpretative needs on a European stage.

*The 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030.* A key objective of this Strategy "is to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language" (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.3). Particular emphasis is also placed on the development of bilingualism, rejuvenation of Irish in Gaeltacht areas, increased use of Irish in public discourse and services and heightened visibility of the language in society. The Strategy sets out a number of objectives and aims to increase over 20 years:

- the number of people with a knowledge of Irish from the then 1.66 million in 2010 to 2 million by 2030;
- the number of daily speakers of Irish from 83,000 in 2010 to 250,000 by 2030.

This is, without doubt, an ambitious challenge and requires determined, judicious and balanced implementation approaches. The difficulties however inherent in the implementation of this road map for the Irish language are considerable. Plans to establish a new authority, *Údarás na Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta* have been shelved. This authority was to be one of the key players in the implementation. *Údarás na Gaeltachta* and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht are now responsible for the implementation of the Strategy in conjunction with *Foras na Gaeilge* and other Government departments such as the Department of Education and Skills. Additional concerns in relation to effective implementation include identification of concrete and practical steps, allocation of financial resources and lack of appropriate timeframes regarding completion, evaluation, enforcement and cross-checking of goals. Clearly, a few broad strokes will not suffice; the devil is in the detail. The implementation process therefore, faces critical and unique challenges.

Like previous government policies, the state's revivalist commitment is most palpable in the education system. The Strategy states that effective implementation requires:

*a focus on developing expertise and skills among the teaching profession - given the critical importance of the school in influencing language awareness and behaviour - as well as in the wider society, in highlighting the cultural value and importance of Irish to the Irish people (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.10).*

Despite the sentiment of this statement, there has been little or no follow through in terms of clearly identifying either the expertise and skills required, or programmes aimed at developing such. The education system however is viewed as one of "the critical engines for generating the linguistic ability" on which this 20-Year Strategy is based (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.12).

*The Gaeltacht Act 2012.* The Gaeltacht Act 2012 has two primary objectives, namely, to provide for a new definition for the Gaeltacht (primarily Irish-speaking region) and to make modifications to the structure and functions of Údarás na Gaeltachta. Údarás na Gaeltachta is the regional authority responsible for the social, cultural and economic development of the Gaeltacht. The overall objective of Údarás na Gaeltachta is to stabilise the current patterns of language shift and to ensure the future of the Gaeltacht as a distinct Irish-speaking community. Under the Gaeltacht Act 2012, it is envisaged that the Gaeltacht will in future be based on linguistic criteria instead of on geographic areas which has been the position to date. Language planning at community level will be central to the new definition of the Gaeltacht. Areas located outside the existing statutory Gaeltacht will be given the opportunity to achieve statutory recognition as Irish Language Networks or as Gaeltacht Service Towns, subject to fulfilling particular criteria. This approach is based on the Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht (2007) and concluded that, without urgent remedial action, the Irish language may only have a lifespan of 15 to 20 years as a community or household language in the Gaeltacht.

#### *Educational Contexts and the Irish Language: Role of the Education System*

The education system and schools plays a critical role in supporting the maintenance and revitalisation of the Irish language. Ó Laoire and Harris (2006, p.7) note:

*While it is true that languages can survive without schools, education systems, nevertheless, have become the cornerstone in the process of reversing language shift in cases of minorised or endangered languages.... The school has become one of the most critical sites for reversing language shift and for language revitalisation in minority/endangered language contexts. Of all domains, the school is perhaps the most crucial and often bears the entire burden of language planning implementation.*

The diverse educational contexts and levels will now be critically examined with a particular focus on Irish language development.

#### *Educational Contexts and the Irish Language: Pre-Primary Education*

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), outside families and junior and senior infants in primary schools, is provided by the private, voluntary and community sector. Service provision is diverse and fragmented. Different settings e.g. crèches, playgroups, nurseries, Irish-medium playgroup settings known as naíonraí, pre-schools, childminders and daycare services, operate within different philosophies e.g. Froebel, High Scope, Montessori, Steiner, and play-based philosophies. This diversity of provision raises some critical questions in relation to the varied experiences children have with the Irish language and culture in ECCE settings and how a sense of personal and cultural identity may be nourished.

The naíonraí play a critical role in play in establishing language usage patterns and in developing competence in the language (Hickey, 1997; Hickey, 1999). Hickey and de Mejía (2014, p.141) argue however that the most significant challenge for the future of naíonraí:

... centres on training and retaining effective and experienced educators with qualifications in early years' education as well as access to effective ongoing training in immersion methodology, accompanied by fluency in the target language and the empathy and personal qualities required for working successfully with very young children.

#### *Educational Contexts and the Irish Language: Primary and Post-Primary Education*

The primary and post-primary education sector includes state-funded schools, special schools and private schools. Primary education consists of an eight year cycle: junior infants, senior infants, and first to sixth classes. Although children are not obliged to

attend school until the age of six, almost all children begin school in the September following their fourth birthday. The curriculum for primary education covers the following key areas: Irish, English, mathematics, social, environment and scientific education, arts education including visual arts music and drama, physical integration, social personal and health education. There are currently 3,286 primary schools catering for a student population of 536,317 ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

There are currently 723 post-primary schools catering for a student population of 367,178 ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)). The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. Vocational schools are state-established and administered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions.

Post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary), followed by a two or three year Senior Cycle (upper secondary), depending on whether the optional Transition Year (TY) is taken. Students usually begin the Junior Cycle at age 12. The Junior Certificate examination is taken after three years. The main objective of the Junior Cycle is for students to complete a broad and balanced curriculum, and to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to proceed to Senior Cycle education.

The Senior Cycle caters for students in the 15 to 18 year age group. It includes an optional Transition Year, which follows immediately after the Junior Cycle. TY provides an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of educational inputs, including work experience, over the course of a year that is free from formal examinations.

During the final two years of Senior Cycle students take one of three programmes, each leading to a State Examination: the traditional Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). The traditional Leaving Certificate examination is the terminal examination of post-primary education and is taken when students are typically 17 or 18 years of age. Syllabuses are available in more than 30 subjects and students are required to take at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish.

There are three distinct categories of primary and post-primary education: English-medium, Irish-medium education in a Gaeltacht region (i.e. Irish-medium maintenance/heritage language education) and Gaelscoileanna (i.e. Irish-medium immersion education outside of a Gaeltacht region). Each of these categories will now be considered below in relation to the Irish language.

#### *English-medium Primary and Post-Primary Education*

In English-medium schools, Irish is taught as second language (L2) subject area to all students and is part of the core curriculum during the years of compulsory schooling 6-15. Results however are deemed to be inadequate in spite of the 1500 class hours that a student spends being taught Irish. A notable minority of students fail to attain mastery in Irish listening, speaking, and general comprehension skills (Harris, 1984, 1988, 1991; Harris et al., 2006; Harris and Murtagh, 1998, 1999). It appears that English-medium education is “no longer playing the revitalization and language maintenance role it traditionally did” (Harris, 2007, p. 361). Yet, despite the challenges, notably in the sphere of English-medium education, findings of a 2009 survey revealed that 71% of respondents agreed that Irish should remain as a compulsory subject in school (Hickey, 2009). Hickey (2009, p.8) concluded that “the great majority of Irish people see the language as central to the history and culture of Ireland”.

### *Irish-medium Education in the Gaeltacht*

Irish-medium maintenance/heritage language education is characteristically provided to Irish language mother tongue (L1) students who attend an Irish-medium school in the Gaeltacht. Clear threats to the sustainability of Irish as a community language in Gaeltacht regions have been well documented of late and it is evident that the threat of language shift is intensifying. Ó Giollagáin et al. (2007, p.11) state that “46% of school-going children in the core Gaeltacht areas start school with little or no Irish”. Native-speaking pupils also increasingly constitute a minority of the overall enrolment of an increasing number of Gaeltacht schools. Gilleece et al. (2012) found that just a fifth of second grade pupils and a quarter of sixth grade pupils spoke Irish as the first language at home. Ní Shéaghdha (2010) found that in Gaeltacht communities where Irish is the most widespread language of the community, only 60% of pupils (less than 1000 pupils), attending primary schools speak Irish as their first language. This profile places competing demands on the Gaeltacht education system and therefore gives rise to a model of Gaeltacht education which caters for a broad and diverse range of socio-linguistic needs i.e. native speakers (maintenance/heritage) and learners of Irish (immersion) alike. The role of Gaeltacht schools has evolved from mainly supporting the maintenance of the language to supporting the revitalization of the Irish language as a community language in Gaeltacht areas (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Laoire & Harris, 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007; Ní Shéaghdha, 2010). This linguistic diversity and complexity coupled with the increasing use of English in Gaeltacht communities presents serious and significant challenges for the Gaeltacht education system.

### *Irish-medium Primary and Post-Primary Education outside of the Gaeltacht*

Irish-medium immersion (IMI) education is normally provided to students for whom Irish is not their L1 in Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium schools) outside of the Gaeltacht. IMI students achieve much higher levels of L2 proficiency than do non-immersion students studying the L2 as a subject area in English-medium education (Harris, 1984; Harris and Murtagh, 1987, 1988; Harris et al., 2006). Even though immersion students display fluency and confidence in their L2 use, the level of L2 accuracy and the range of L2 competencies achieved are less than native-like (Harris et al., 2006; Ó Duibhir, 2009). Immersion students use a restricted vocabulary and simplified grammar limited to domains experienced in school, they often transfer from English syntax and lexicon, they do not acquire native-like syntactic competence and lack distinctive idiomatic conversational features i.e. lack lexical and pragmatic expressions natural to a native speaker (Genesee and Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Harley, 1992).

Baker (2001, p.233) suggests that a “lack of spontaneous or contrived second language opportunity and a dearth of cultural occasions to actively and purposefully use the second language” may partly be the explanation. Ní Mhaoláin (2005, p.25) too remarks that one of the recognized weaknesses of the Irish immersion system is that “a full language context cannot be created within the classroom because the natural context is not there”. The pervasive presence of a majority language beyond the school is a challenge that all minority language programmes face.

### *The Irish Language and the Education System: Barriers to Progress*

In spite of the various and converging governmental initiatives and the teaching of the Irish language in different educational contexts as a compulsory subject area, results are somewhat limited and the situation of Irish appears as problematic. Briefly summarized, the following facts are often mentioned to underline the difficulties that the promotion of Irish has to face:

- A significant number of reports and research findings clearly reflect the low level of proficiency in the language attained by many students in the education system (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 2007, 2015; Harris, 1988, 1991; Harris and Murtagh, Harris et al., 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008; Péterváry et al., 2014).
- The low level of motivation for learning and using Irish among many students along with the dearth of opportunities to use the language continues to pose one of the more serious challenges to the societal revitalization of the Irish language (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Harris et al., 2006; Ó Duibhir, 2009; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007, Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015).
- The lack of linguistic proficiency among some teachers is well documented (Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 2008; Harris et al., 2006; Mac Donnacha et al. 2005; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008).
- Many teachers experience difficulty in implementing a convincing pedagogy (Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 2008; Harris et al., 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008; Ó Duibhir, 2009; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ní Shéaghda, 2010).
- The Gaeltacht education system is not succeeding in meeting the needs of young native speakers of Irish or transforming those who come to school as English speakers into active Irish speakers (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007; Péterváry et al., 2014).
- The need for targeted support across the continuum is continually called for (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 2008, 2015; Harris et al., 2006).
- 2,023 students in their fifth or sixth year of post-primary schooling were exempted from studying Irish for their Leaving Certificate in 2012/13 ([www.oireachtasdebates.ie](http://www.oireachtasdebates.ie)). This is yet another element of the language debate which needs to be addressed if we are to reawaken the language in our education system.

### **Concluding Remarks: Cautious Room for Optimism**

It is important to highlight at this juncture, significant positive factors which may revolutionize the way in which students relate to the Irish language into the future. It is only through combining our strengths with a rational assessment of the challenges and priorities that we can hope to be effective in reviving and reawakening the language through our education system. Please refer to Table 1.1 for an overview of key positive factors which give rise to cautious room for optimism.

**Table 1. Cautious Room for Optimism**

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<b>International dimension</b>	<p>Irish identity and its associative links with culture has no doubt influenced the growth in popularity of the Irish language. The Ireland of today is a much more confident country where people are proud of their Irish heritage and its new role in Europe (Mac Craith, 2008). The EU's inclusion of the Irish language opens up a new avenue for social mobility due to the need for Irish translators and interpreters. Globalization coupled with the influence of the EU has enabled Irish people to acknowledge that their language, Irish, is a very powerful tool to express one's identity, especially in Europe, and that Ireland has a responsibility for protecting it.</p> <p>There has been an unprecedented influx of people to Ireland from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds resulting from increased immigration, in recent years. As a result, a changing sociolinguistic ecology is emerging in Ireland. The 2011 census revealed that more than half a million Irish residents (514,068 people) speak a language other than Irish or English at home. This dramatic change to the linguistic composition of Ireland's population may also have created an awareness of the importance of the Irish language as an element of national identity and global diversity.</p> <p>The Fulbright Commission Ireland sponsors student and teacher exchange programmes between the US and Ireland. In 2006 it was sending four Irish-language teachers to the US every year. Now it sends 10 and has links to 50 or so third-level American institutions and 90 community organizations involved with teaching and promoting the language.</p>
<b>Identity Affirming Opportunities</b>	<p>Throughout this paper, it has been articulated that the current state of the Irish language is inseparable from the wider cultural situation. Irish has been given a boost by the success of the Irish-medium television station, TG4, the Official Languages Act, 2003 and, since 2007, the official working status of Irish in the EU. One obvious benefit is on the jobs front.</p> <p>Nowadays, blogging and tweeting through Irish is commonplace. It seems obvious that if students are led to areas of Irish which are of interest to them, they find it energizing and invigorating and can relate to Irish and express themselves in new ways while affirming their <i>Irish</i> identities.</p> <p>We are forever hearing about the imminent death of the Irish language, but there is a growing interest in Irish among the next generation. The Irish language's vitality is more aptly represented by an image of the Connemara-based band, <i>Seo Linn</i>, who recently succeeded in raising €50,000 on Kickstarter, a crowdfunding site, singing the latest chart hit as Gaeilge with hundreds of teenagers.</p>
<b>Policy</b>	<p>The lack of linguistic proficiency among some teachers is well documented and impacts on some students' bilingual abilities and development. <i>The Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education</i> recognizes the need for high standards of Irish among both primary and post-primary teachers "in regard to teaching Irish as a subject, using it as a means of communication and as a medium of instruction" (Teaching Council, 2011, p.11). The Teaching Council expects that this need can be factored in at each phase of the continuum.</p> <p>As discussed earlier, <i>The 20 year Strategy for the Irish Language (2010)</i> outlines significant support for Irish in the education system. The Strategy points out that a <i>National Centre for Irish-medium Teacher Professional Development</i>, will lead, manage, develop and support teacher education provision for the entire cycle of Irish-medium schools through consultancy, professional development activities, accredited training programmes and resource development. As part of the <i>20 Year Strategy for the Irish language 2010-2030</i>, the Department of Education and Skills has developed a range of policy proposals that are designed to strengthen Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht. The proposals have been shaped by the experience of Gaeltacht schools and a number of major research studies. These policy proposals are outlined in '<i>Policy Proposals on Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Areas</i>'. The views of all stakeholders are being sought on these policy proposals at present.</p>

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**Table 1 (Cont.). Cautious Room for Optimism**

<b>Curriculum</b>	<p>A new integrated language curriculum for primary schools is currently being developed by the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) and will be available for junior classes (infants to 2nd class) in September 2015. It is envisaged that this integrated language curriculum will address second language (L2) acquisition and development and the complex issues that attend teaching Irish as both a <i>medium</i> and as a <i>subject</i> in the primary sector.</p>
<b>Initial Teacher Education</b>	<p>All Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes have been re-structured and re-envisioned and now incorporate specific modules which focus on Irish-medium immersion (IMI) and bilingual pedagogy and theory.</p> <p>The supply of teachers with the necessary language and pedagogical competence is a key driver of effective delivery of Irish-medium education. A particular challenge for teachers in Gaeltacht and IMI schools is how to differentiate teaching and learning approaches in classrooms in order to cater for the specific needs of native speakers of Irish, particularly in the multi-grade or multi-class context. It is in this context that some ITE institutions have expressed interest in the provision of an ITE programme, <i>An B. Oid. san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge (Bachelor of Education in Irish-medium Education)</i>. This programme will be shaped by the learning outcomes set by the Teaching Council (2011) and which will specifically incorporate and develop the following critical components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High standards of teacher competency in the Irish language and a knowledge of second language teaching and learning;</li> <li>▪ Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and integrated curriculum development and assessment;</li> <li>▪ Culturally responsive pedagogy and language-attentive teaching.</li> </ul>
<b>Additional Postgraduate Opportunities</b>	<p>The steady rise of Irish-language preschool and primary education since the 1970s, may now be contributing to an increased demand for Irish-language courses at third level. According to the Higher Education Authority, the number of students studying through Irish at third level 'is not only very healthy but has been described as a mini-revival' (Wallace, A., 2015). Innovative new programmes are constantly being developed. <i>Fiontar</i>, an interdisciplinary school established in 1993 at Dublin City University, aims to link the Irish language with contemporary finance, computing and enterprise, all taught through the medium of Irish.</p> <p>Mary Immaculate College, Limerick provides a hybrid postgraduate programme, <i>An M. Oid. san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge (M. Ed. in Irish-medium Education)</i>. This programme is the first in the Republic of Ireland to incorporate a coherent set of modules designed specifically for IMI educators and other professionals in Irish-medium education. National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway, provides a Professional Master of Education (PME) programme conducted solely through the medium of Irish for teachers working in the Irish-medium post primary sector. These programmes target the unique professional development needs and linguistic competencies of teachers in Gaeltacht and IMI schools.</p>
<b>Research</b>	<p>A growing number of IMI practitioners and IMI research students are engaging in small-scale qualitative research. Such research has the potential not only for crafting and legitimating policy on IMI education but may also herald benefits and expose challenges to advance this educational sector in Ireland in the coming years.</p>
<b>Support</b>	<p>In the current climate of constrained resources, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) continues to cater for the diverse Irish language needs of the educational sector through the provision of teaching resources, support services and research initiatives. Such support is essential to 'future proof' our capacity to respond to rapidly changing demands and new circumstances in relation to the Irish language.</p>

While the positive factors outlined above in Table 1.1 are admirable, they continue to provide an exemplary vision of just what can be achieved.

The analysis of an Update Report to the Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Usage of Irish in the Gaeltacht: 2006-2011, shows that the rate at which the Irish language is

being eroded as a community language in the Gaeltacht has not abated since the first research report, The Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Usage of Irish in the Gaeltacht, which was published in 2007. According to the authors, erosion is now taking place at a faster rate than was predicted in the original study and demands urgent intervention.

The Irish language is the Republic of Ireland's official language as discussed earlier, yet the majority of the Irish population does not speak the language in their daily personal lives. If we look back at the role of the Irish language in society, it is clear that the language has had a turbulent and traumatic history and has endured a complex and varied relationship with the Irish people. The language we chose to use on a daily basis conveys our identity as people. When we discuss the decline of the Irish language in Irish society and the challenges and barriers we are confronted with on a daily basis, we often tend to critically examine the role of the State and its failure to preserve and to promote the Irish language in the education system, in the Gaeltacht regions and in Irish society in general. Although we have acknowledged and addressed these failings in this paper, we also believe that it is now necessary for the Irish people to examine their own personal reflections in the mirror which convey their "psychological make-up" (Ó Tuama, 1995, p.28).

The Irish poet, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, in her poem 'Ceist na Teangan' ('The Language Issue'), presents the language as a little boat carrying hopes and dreams, but ultimately abandoned to the stream of fate (Nic Eoin, 2011, p.111). We are now placing our fears and hopes in this boat and sending her out to sea to find her fate. We remain optimistic that the next generation will be happy to accept the oars and hopefully continue with the journey.

*Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh* I place my hope on the water  
*i mbáidín teangan* in this little boat  
*faoi mar a leagfá naíonán* of the language, the way a body might put  
*i gcliabhán ...* an infant  
*ansan é a leagadh síos* in a basket...  
*i measc na ngiolcach* then set the whole thing down amidst  
*is coigeal na mban sí* the sedge  
*le taobh na habhann,* and bulrushes by the edge  
*féachaint n'fheadaraís* of a river  
*cá dtabharfaidh an sruth é,*  
*féachaint, dála Mhaoise,* only to have it borne hither and thither,  
*an bhfóirfidh iníon Fhorainn?* not knowing where it might end up:  
in the lap, perhaps,  
Of some Pharaoh's daughter.  
(Ní Dhomhnaill, 1991:128). (trans. Paul Muldoon, 2007:155).



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