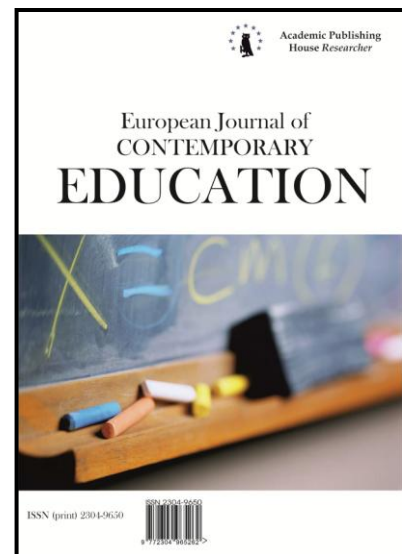




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The Role of Irish Language Teaching: Cultural Identity Formation or Language Revitalization?

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Abstract

The focal point of the article is Irish language teaching in the Republic of Ireland. Firstly, we deal with the most significant documents where the status of the Irish language is being defined. In this respect, for the purposes of analysis, we have chosen the document titled *20 Year Strategy for the Irish language* which plays a crucial role in preservation and further cultivation of the Irish language given the fact that the Irish language is still regarded as an important element of Irish national and cultural identity. New didactic methods used in Irish language teaching are also included in the contribution. Specifically, we focused on CLIL methods used in Irish language classes. Last but not least, we also present new challenges that Irish language teachers must face in the 21st century as well as on the crucial issues concerning Irish language revitalization and protection.

Keywords: Irish language, Irish language teaching, identity, revitalization, protection.

1. Introduction

Firstly, it is inevitable to mention several crucial facts closely connected with the history of the Irish language. Secondly, it is of utmost importance to focus on the innovative methods used in Irish language teaching in Irish schools and also to deal with potential challenges to education process of this compulsory subject. We suppose that the employment of effective didactic methods during Irish language classes can be beneficial in the field of language revitalization and protection, supporting language sustainability and vitality. In the last part of our paper we will stress the significance of not only Irish language teaching but also the very existence of Irish language and current initiatives and programs aimed at its preservation and cultivation. The paper's aim will be

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realized through adopting the hypothesis that Irish language is not just solely a teaching subject, but it is deemed as one of the substantial signs of national and cultural identity of the Irish nation.

As it is generally known, the Irish language* has been declared as one of the official languages of the European Union, which happened precisely in 2007. According to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, since granting the Irish language the same status as is being enjoyed by other Member States' languages, new arrangements must have been also accepted following the changed status of the Irish language which had been a treaty language before (since Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, the same year as UK did). These mentioned new arrangements for Irish means:

- Knowledge of the Irish language is taken into account for the purposes of recruitment to the EU institutions
- EU regulations adopted jointly by the Council and the European Parliament will be translated into Irish
- Interpretation from Irish is also provided to meet needs at Ministerial meetings and at the European Parliament
- The nameplates in front of Irish Ministers and delegations now say "Eire Ireland" to reflect the new status of Irish in the EU

In short, the Irish language acquired new status that inhabitants of the Republic of Ireland have been striving for long decades. On the one hand, it has brought many positives if we take into consideration increase of national awareness and strengthening of national and cultural identity, while on the other hand, it also carries certain challenges that the state and the people must cope with. Therefore, the aim of our article is to deal with Irish language learning and teaching whereas education and educational process is one of the areas which have been affected by these latest changes. Education sector has been simultaneously facing new challenges bringing into question old methods used in teaching and introducing new, innovative ones.

2. Materials and methods

The decision to use any particular language is viewed as the democratic choice of every individual, simultaneously being an expression of that individual's identity. Language in this context is thus viewed as the very condition of an individual's identity. The interrelation of language and identity can therefore be examined from different perspectives (linguistic, sociolinguistic, psychological, and historical).

The aim of this paper is to present the information gathered through the medium of field research realized in the City of Galway, within the National University of Ireland (abbreviated as NUIG), as well as outside the city, accentuating the cardinal aims and priorities of the officially adopted *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030* and *The Official Languages Act*, which came into force in 2003, on the current state and position of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland, focusing in a more detailed way on how the language positions itself within the cultural identity of the Irish. Furthermore, we focus on possible techniques for revitalizing and protecting the language for future generations taking into account the changes and challenges which the education sector faces. All the data acquired was gained, using the techniques of qualitative research, through the medium of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and direct and indirect observations realized during our short-term stay in the Republic of Ireland.

The field research aimed to uncover both the real state of the Irish language in the education sector today and the attitudes of people towards language revitalization and towards different issues concerning the probability of Irish language survival in the future.

Our research was initiated in Slovakia in September 2012 and finalized in the Republic of Ireland, in the city of Galway, within National University of Ireland (NUIG), from February to March 2015. Our informants' opinions on Irish language teaching and its position within Irish cultural and national identity and in people's everyday lives were examined and further analysed. The background of informants was diverse ranging from representatives of educational, institutional and other public bodies sector including ordinary citizens living in the Republic of Ireland. The representative sample reached the number of 100 respondents including all opinions

* According to Article 8 of the Constitution, the Irish language is the national language and the first official language in the Republic of Ireland, while the English language is considered as the second official language.

gained from interviews and focus group discussions organized within the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway and nearby areas. Detailed information about our research can be found in the published monograph called *Irish Language and Identity: Revitalization and Protection*, published in 2015 by the Matej Bel University in the city of Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. In the contribution we deal only with the selected aspects of Irish language revitalization, namely, through the medium of education. The topic of language revitalization is very complex and there is need to examine it in a more detailed way in the future. In this article we hope to have shown just a few aspects concerning Irish language teaching in the Republic of Ireland from the point of view of external researchers.

Research area

We believe that Irish language is an essential part of spiritual, non-material heritage of mankind. The survival of Irish language can be deemed as a key factor for retaining cultural and linguistic diversity of the world. Therefore, Irish language revitalization is important not only for Irish and European cultural identity. Still, Irish language is characterized as a symbol of Irish identity. In our point of view, Irish language is one of the key elements of Irish cultural and national identity, the loss of which would simultaneously and inevitably bring loss of some particular cultural traditions, centuries old, typical for Ireland. Such a loss could be detrimental also in terms of cultural heritage development. According to authors focusing on the current state of languages, majority of world's languages are in danger of extinction, so there is a very high probability of their disappearance in the very near future. This alarming situation was our primary drive for exploring the topic of Irish language teaching further considering the fact that education sector can help immensely in the area of Irish language revitalization. There has been issued also a revitalization plan in the Republic of Ireland called *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030*, which is a very well-organized and proposed plan aimed at increasing the number of Irish language users in the horizon of twenty years. Since 2007, when the Irish language was adopted as one of the fully official languages of the EU, many changes have happened in the area of Irish language revitalization. That is why we decided to consider some aspects of the current situation of the Irish language teaching and some aspects of Irish language revitalization.

Participants

The selection of study participants was intentional having in mind reaching the most versatile representative material. Therefore, we have chosen members of academia, representatives of organizations and institutions residing in the city of Galway and nearby areas aimed at Irish language revitalization as well as on ordinary citizens and students attending various courses within university. Particularly, our research was realized in the following institutions which we consider crucial for Irish language revitalization given the fact that all of them have got a huge commitment to Irish language. Therefore, the participants of our research were selected from the below mentioned organizations since they are deemed as key subjects in the area of language protection.

Participants of our research came from different social background, including political. They were representatives of major political parties at the time of our research, namely, members of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil.

List of the visited institutions:

1. National University of Ireland in the city of Galway (NUIG). Within the NUIG we realized interviews with members of the Centre for Irish Studies, Arás na Gaelige (Department of Irish Language), Department of History, etc.
2. Gaillimh le Gaelige (Galway with Irish)
3. Conradh na Gaelige (Gaelic League)
4. National Irish Language Theatre (An Taibhdhearc)
5. Udarás na Gaeltachta
6. Ealain na Gaeltachta Teoranta
7. Galway City Gallery
8. Galway City Museum
9. Galway City Library

The citizens we interviewed came from different areas within the Republic of Ireland, not only from Gaeltacht areas (Moycullen, Na Forbacha, Spiddal) but also from other non-Gaeltacht, mainly English speaking areas (county Offaly – Killeigh, Tullamore, county Wicklow – Aughrim, Dublin) in order to reach different spectrum of opinions, approaches and attitudes to language protection and revitalization.

Recruitment methods

All our participants were contacted by e-mail in advance which was followed by face-to-face communication. We explained them the nature of our research, the aims and purposes of interview. They were also presented a detailed plan of interview. All of the contacted people responded and made an arrangement with us stating the time and venue of the meeting. Only in marginal cases communication was carried out by e-mail.

The people who were contacted and asked to participate in an interview or focus-group discussion consented to our invitation. No one of them refused.

Study sample

The representative sample reached the number of 100 respondents including all opinions gained from interviews and focus group discussions. Our field research was carried out, as mentioned earlier, in the city of Galway and nearby areas as well as in other non-Gaeltacht areas situated outside from the real Irish-speaking regions. Our research aimed to uncover the attitudes towards Irish language revitalization, protection and future of this, today minority language as well as its potential within education sector referring to the topic of Irish language teaching, especially to how to save the language through various innovative approaches used in education.

Detailed information about our research can be found in the published monograph called *Irish Language and Identity: Revitalization and Protection*, published in 2015 by the Matej Bel University in the city of Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. In the contribution we deal only with the selected aspects of Irish language revitalization, namely, through the medium of education. The topic of language revitalization is very complex and there is need to examine it in a more detailed way in the future. In this article we hope to have shown just a few aspects concerning Irish language teaching in the Republic of Ireland from the point of view of external researchers.

Method for gaining informed consent

All the participants were asked a primary question at the beginning of each interview if they consent to the interview being made. Their informed consent is part of our audio recording archives where we keep all oral informed consents from our informants.

Method of recording data

First of all, we elaborated a detailed plan for observations, interviews and focus-group discussions. All data obtained were recorded using our voice tracer (audio recording techniques). The data were subsequently transcribed following each interview, studied, coded and analysed. All the transcribed data are part of our research archives kept in the computer file (part of our research archives).

We have elaborated a detailed plan of interviews or an interview guide a few months before carrying them out. This detailed plan comprised of the proposal of observations, research questions, aims of research, list of topics discussed and asked including the initial, key and final questions presented during interviews. Just to be sure, we have also developed a list of additional final questions.

Once the data saturation was reached, we have finalized our data collection. This was when the newly obtained information started to repeat and no new findings were made.

Data analysis followed the data collection, saturation and transcription. We were inspired by the grounded theory aspects which was used during our analysis beginning the transcription and coding of the text aimed at searching for the key topics and aspects related to Irish language teaching and revitalization.

3. Findings

Irish Language Teaching

As being indicated in *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030*, made by the Government of Ireland, the key focus of the strategy is to strengthen the position of the language within education system, while the transmission of Irish as a living language within family and between generations is critically important. The strategy is hugely in favour of creating a supportive framework and the opportunities in which Irish can be used on in a natural way within households and communities which is stressed to be important for all the areas. Gaeltacht areas (the areas situated mostly in the western part of the country in which predominant language spoken is Irish) are crucially important for Irish language revitalization and language survival as it was pointed out by our respondent from Galway – Mayo Institute of Technology: *„The heartland of Irish language (Gaeltacht) is in danger, if it collapses, we will not be able to revive Irish language anymore, that connection will be gone, the strength from geographical community would be lost if that is not supported.“*

The strategy is aimed at reaching societal bilingualism so that the inhabitants are fluent in both official languages. These aims have created challenge not only for government but also for the people. What matters most are the attitudes towards language protection given the fact that the right to speak a particular language is deemed as one of the democratic choices of every individual.

The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language* has been inspired by the *Government Statement on the Irish Language*, published in December 2006. Following the Statement, there are thirteen policy objectives included, aimed at Government’s support for the development and preservation of the Irish language and the Gaeltacht (as a unique region, a part of cultural heritage of the nation, not only geopolitically (in terms of area) but also geoartistically defined as a well or a fountain of Irish language. We have selected especially those objectives which concern teaching of Irish and teaching through the medium of Irish. In this respect, the second objective seems of great importance as it contains the information referring to *the Official Languages Act 2003*, which is another important legal document concerning the Irish language. In the act, there is noted that the right of the public to use Irish in dealings with the State and with other bodies will be developed and the appropriate arrangements to deliver this will be put in place (Slatinská, 2015). One of our informants stated that *„the Official Languages Act was a good idea as there are still people who do not feel comfortable in speaking English and it is their right to speak in their native language, there are still people from the islands who did not have English so much and we have to look after them.“*

After making reference to another significant legal document, we focus on other objectives concerning the education, namely on Objectives no. 5, 6 and 7 introduced in the Government Statement on the Irish language. The objective no. 5 states that Irish will be taught as an obligatory subject from primary to Leaving Certificate level. The curriculum will foster oral and written competence in Irish among students and an understanding of its value to people. This objective is intended to be realized by enhanced investment in professional development and ongoing support for teachers, as well as in provision of textbooks and resources, and, what is of crucial importance for this paper, through the support for innovative approaches to teaching and learning which are crucially needed. Innovative approaches could eliminate students’ fears in expressing themselves through Irish and help them reach confidence when speaking as it was described in the following opinion: *„There is a fear factor involved with Irish language if you are not fluent, people are afraid if they make mistakes.“*

Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium education) will continue to be supported at primary level and all-Irish provision at postprimary level will be developed to meet follow-on demand. Majority of our respondents saw benefits of Irish medium schools pointing out to the fact that the students from these schools tend to perform better referring to their school results as it was described by one of our informants: *„Gaelscoileanna is a good thing, very good experience, it has grown because people have been happy with it, teachers here are more enthusiastic, younger, it is good for identity, even though there is element of elitism. In previous generations people who spoke Irish were considered to be country people, they were ashamed of speaking Irish in the town, now people are much more open to multilingualism.“*

As it can be deduced from the previous statement, the Irish language nowadays has gained a new status which makes it more prestigious and trendy for students to study it and find

employment later on in their lives for which the Irish language is required. One of our informants stated that: *„The children in gaelscoils have higher academic achievements. It seems that if there is going to be economic dividend from language and culture then it can become popular, but in the absence of any economic benefits the language is seen as redundant and unnecessary.“* People who speak Irish language fluently nowadays can be hired by a range of interpreting and translation agencies in Ireland as well as in European Union institutions. Moreover, there are many opportunities to get a good teaching position with Irish in the education sector which can be a motivation to study Irish at universities.

Many students responded that they would like to continue transmitting the Irish language to their children which is a good sign for the language vitality and sustainability. There are still families in Ireland who decided to raise their children through the medium of Irish as the following statement indicates: *„Your parents decide about the first language, it is a huge impact. Now we have two kids, their first language is Irish, we have got Irish household. Everybody is responsible for language protection, I am making my contribution to survival of Irish, you must be positive and not negative if you want to inspire other people, to show people, to make them wanting be like you.“* Establishing Irish language household can help reach the goals of the 20-Year Strategy concerning the societal bilingualism. Bilingualism is beneficial in each possible way since cognition skills multiply. It is about mental exercise, engagement with the world is better. Bilingualism was evaluated positively by all of our respondents although much concern was raised about the lack of information concerning the advantages of raising children bilingually: *„Mothers and young parents should be educated about bilingualism and how language transmission works. It must be backed by community. Language and language choice is unquantifiable because it is do deeply ingrained in psychology.“*

In connection with Objective no. 7, Irish language pre-school education will continue to be supported and third-level education through Irish will be further developed. This is one of the ways how to ensure language revitalization and normalization through the very early age beginning with immersion education which can help a lot in the long-term horizon as one of our respondents described: *„It is very important to focus on initial/preschool years in order to support intergenerational transmission of Irish.“*

Objective no. 9 is oriented on high quality broadcast services through the medium of Irish that will be ensured especially through the continuous development of RTE, Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4. Teachers have got also wide range of possibilities to work with Irish-medium channels in the Irish language classes just to show students that the language is still being used as it was stressed by our interviewee: *„Media play a huge role in identity formation, documentaries are very important, people see role models in TV. TG4 is important, for old generation it is also Raidió na Gaeltachta, there is also soap opera on TG4 which is all good. Audiovisual industry shows the value of language, at least there are certain jobs, it attracts young people and keeping them in the area.“*

Another objective, not included specifically in the 13 objectives, is an objective of Government to support the promotion and teaching of Irish abroad, through the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs. One of the emphases is fixated on the teaching of Irish in third-level colleges in a range of different countries. Following the financial support from the DAHG (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht Affairs) Irish language teaching is supported in many European and non-European universities. This also helps keeping the language alive and sustainable. One of the huge benefits is the fact that students from non-Irish universities can get a lot of information through Irish language tutor on the Irish language, culture and identity.

Following the Government Strategy, the main aims are translated into the activities aimed at increasing the knowledge of Irish, creating opportunities for the use of Irish and fostering positive attitudes towards its use (Slatinská, Pecníková, 2016).

Taking into account the specific objectives of the strategy striving to increase the number of people with a knowledge of Irish from 1, 66 to 2 million and the number of daily speakers of Irish from the current level of approximately 83, 000 to 250,000, we have to explore what changes have happened at schools. Moreover, according to the Strategy, education is one of the areas designed for action.

As it is further indicated in the Strategy, the Irish language teaching must be unconditionally improved taking into account weak knowledge of students as well of teachers and unwillingness to learn the language, probably because of less attractive teaching approaches carried out during lessons. „*The Irish language courses were deadly boring, using older literature, there was very little proper conversation. The curriculum has changed since I left school but still more contemporary Irish poetry and books should be used and only then the students should go to old literature.*” Irish language teaching must inevitably get new support and include more innovative approaches during classes as it was described by another of our informants: „*Irish children should be taught by using experiential method because Irish do not have so much self-confidence, they must be taught by hiking, cooking via Irish, learning by experience to open their mouths.*“

Resulting from the abovementioned information, the actions proposed in the area of education are designed to achieve the underlying principles of the Strategy which include enhancement and extension of ability in Irish more deeply and among larger numbers of people, reversing negative attitudes towards Irish language usage and fostering positive attitudes in their place and expanding the available opportunities for the use of Irish within education system by extending Irish as a medium of instruction, as well as a subject, and by linking school language learning to the informal use of Irish in recreational, cultural and other out-of school activities. The fact that language should be taught through culture and culture through language was expressed by many of our interviewees who was also aware of the huge potential that Irish language knowledge can have in terms of other languages' acquisition: „*Language interwine with culture and art, culture must be alive, we need new songs, theatre in Irish, modern artists, contemporary literature. Multiculturalism is important. Language is one of the attributes of the cultural identity, knowing Irish helped me to understand other languages (Spanish), Irish is more expressive than English, appreciation of our history is needed.*“

Bearing in mind current innovative methods used in the 21st century and the humanistic approach to education, each child should be viewed as having a unique identity (Biloveský, 2013). As mentioned by Kosová (2011) the main aim of school transformation is to transform the traditional encyclopedia-memorizing and directive education into a creative-human education with emphases being laid on activity and freedom of personality and its power to make progressive, creative way of existence for life in the new millennium. According to our point of view, the use of Irish by connecting the subject with everyday life might be highly beneficial for its further development making it more authentic, attractive and popular among the learners.

Moreover, the Strategy is aimed not only at students and teachers (through developing their language fluency and accuracy) but also at family and the support of family in Irish language learning. Family is the cornerstone of society playing a huge role in language acquisition of the child. Many of our respondents were raised through the medium of Irish: „*I would feel Irish language part of my identity, my language is very important, my parents spoke only Irish to me, even now when my Irish is rusty I can still use it when I need it, when I meet native Irish speakers.*“ Therefore, one of the areas which the Strategy tries to hit by instant support is the area of family.

New Methods Used in Irish language Teaching

Considering the fact that the era in which we live is influenced to a great extent by new communication and media technologies, the teachers must voluntarily or involuntarily face new methods and devices used in language teaching. According to *the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030*, building ability in reading, writing and speech must count with the recent developments in media and technology. Therefore, traditional approaches must be seriously combined with new approaches and innovative means in language learning as it was pointed out by our respondent: „*Irish children should be taught by using experiential method because Irish do not have so much self-confidence, they must be taught by hiking, cooking via Irish, learning by experience to open their mouths.*“

The new innovative methods combine several activities that can be fully developed not only while Irish language teaching, e.g.: organization of literary events and activities in public libraries throughout the year, authors' readings and literary programmes for schools, which means bringing public and private life of a students in contact, development of new materials, CDs, DVDs and books in Irish, promotion and development of books clubs in Irish, development of at least one physical literary Irish-language venue or space in Dublin, development of a literary promotion by

RTÉ and TG4, development of new up-to-date dictionaries, both English-Irish and Irish-English as well as development of initiatives to encourage writing in Irish by young people in a range of media – journalism, blogging, creative writing, drama and film scripts.

The last point seems especially important for this day's generation of young people who communicate quite a lot through the medium of blogs and other social networks which is also a place for new identity creation. Therefore, the teacher of the 21st century should take all the mentioned facts into account and bear them in mind when coming to the classroom. Moreover, the teacher of the Irish language should be aware of the fact that teaching English, French or German is much different from teaching Irish. *„There is big difference in teaching languages, Irish is very much about poetry and I wanted to speak, it was just about reciting, these days it might be the same, it was very mechanical, I knew more French than Irish, Irish was more by heart, too strict, while in French you learnt how to speak, Irish was deadly boring.“*

Following the new innovative methods used in Irish language teaching, CLIL is used in the whole island of Ireland as a part of mainstream school education according to the brochure bearing the title Content and Language Integrated Learning at School in Europe, which means that it is an integral part of one or more levels of the education system and not limited in time. CLIL is used precisely in primary and secondary education. In the Republic of Ireland as well as in other European countries any subject may be chosen for CLIL from among those on offer. Moreover, the minimum amount of time for this type of provision is not indicated in any specific recommendation. In general secondary education pupils may choose to be assessed in the target language or the language of the mainstream curriculum (they can choose either Irish or English). Qualifications required for teaching CLIL provision in primary and secondary education in the Republic of Ireland are the same as in Slovakia i.e. the teacher must meet the basic qualification(s) of a fully qualified teacher. CLIL as a term is not used except by specialists in language education.

According to Ó Duibhir (2011) evidence show that language learning is more effective when it is combined with content learning in another subject other than the language being learned. They also stress that the context of Irish primary schools is particularly favourable to using CLIL in teaching Irish as a second or additional language as all primary teachers need to demonstrate a satisfactory level of competence in Irish to gain full recognition as primary school teachers. In the context of the Republic of Ireland there could be applied three ways of using CLIL. One of them is that individual teachers could consider using CLIL informally, either in their language class or by teaching content from other subjects areas through Irish from time to time, second would mean that schools could decide to offer an extended core programme where a number of subjects or aspects of subject would be taught through Irish in a more explicit way, or third option would be for schools to be able to choose to offer partial immersion programmes for up to 50 % of instructional time. However, the last possibility would require the support of parents and the school community as well as support for the teachers in the course of professional development and provision of resources.

As it was later shown in other research's findings, a significantly higher level of achievement in Irish was attained through classes which conducted some Irish-medium instruction outside of the Irish lesson proper. Following the mentioned findings, the CLIL instruction may be an effective way to teach Irish in Irish primary schools. There were also several projects undertaken dealing with CLIL method. It seems highly beneficial that a number of principles were agreed with the teachers with regard to teaching the lesson, like, e.g. that in the beginning teachers would accept questions from pupils in English but answer them in simple Irish, and later they would rephrase those questions given in English in Irish. Throughout the time, the pupils should gradually be encouraged to use Irish (Harris, Duibhir, 2011). This method seems to be very effective especially at primary levels when students start with language acquisition.

On the one hand, using CLIL seems highly beneficial for mental cognition of students. Therefore one should be also aware of the negative aspects of too rigid curriculum which should be minimized gradually as it was indicated by another informant: *„There are a lot of faults in our education system. It is curriculum based system just concentrating on exams during secondary school education, there is no room from observing, going outside the syllabus.“* Many of our respondents criticized the education system according to their own school experience: *„Irish is not difficult but it is about the way it is taught, I could speak French better after 14 years of school. I can speak French better than Irish, it is disgrace for me. Teaching system is very bad – learning*

off by notes, by heart and then doing the leaving certificate, a kind of authoritarian way of looking at things, teaching policies must be changed.“ This is also one of the areas which should undergo a reform.

Another important method used in order to strengthen the pupil’s knowledge of a target language is using stories. The stories can be to a great extent used for teaching students about different cultures as well as about the culture of their own (Mešková, 2016). In such a way, the stories talking about the fairy life of Ireland could be incorporated into language learning. In such a way, pupils’ awareness of their own cultural heritage through the medium of written word could be fostered. As it is known, using stories in a lesson can help foster pupil’s creativity, especially thanks to various post exercises aimed at developing learners’ creative thinking.

Moreover, the student’s interests connected with recent development in the area of information technologies should be also taken into account by the teacher. The students should be encouraged to participate in such blogs or websites that are beneficial for education like the one where the fans of Irish language regularly contribute or share their knowledge and speak the language actively.

As being put by Dailey (2012) the increased use of Irish online and around the world could help foster the power of the language. In the article included in BBC News Magazine, the author describes the state of the Irish abroad and indicates the efforts of the people in America, the ancestors of the Hibernian Irish, who have created so called virtual Gaeltachts where they can meet virtually and share information of common interest. The creation of such blogs where students could share their opinions in Irish could be seen as a positive aspect and make the language learning more authentic, attractive and enjoyed.

4. Discussion

Challenges faced not only by Irish Language Teachers

In the subsequent part we would like to focus on some selected challenges faced not only by the Irish language teachers but also by students as well as many organizations aimed at Irish language preservation and cultivation. Every teacher has got possibility to choose from a wide range of teaching material or teaching methods. Parents realize that first of all new opportunities and Irish-language networks must be created in order to revitalize the language so that it will be trendy for new generations who will be inclined to learn it: „Irish is not cool for my kids, they just do it for exams, they cannot use it in the shop, in every day life.“ Only when the primary feeling of being obliged to learn the language finally disappears, then solid foundations for language revitalization and normalization can be made.

When speaking about challenges for Irish language teachers, one should have a look at challenges faced by those teachers who teach in Irish medium schools or at schools where Irish is taught as a second language. According to Markey (2007) recent studies show that pupils in Irish-medium schools tend to be both motivated to learn Irish and show favorable attitudes towards the language. Although students from gaelscoils have got different approach to language, there is still lack of Irish-language networks where they could use the language actively. That is the main reason why many mainstream school students, but not only, do not view learning Irish as a good thing: *„Irish was deadly boring, very mechanical, it was very much about poetry, learning by heart, reciting poems, while in French you were taught how to speak. Irish is nice thing to have but French would be more useful for us.“*

Following the learning of Irish as a second language, according to Markey (2007), there are also several challenges and difficulties that education system must face. The situation is quite different in comparison with Irish-medium schools. Only a minority of non-native speaker students leave school with the capacity to participate in social or cultural events conducted through the medium of Irish. Moreover, what seems to be quite striking, is the fact that for the majority learning Irish is perceived as necessary evil, a price one pays of citizenship perhaps, but essentially a waste of time. Consequently, because of poor motivation and underachievement, learning Irish as L2 in English medium primary and postprimary schools has proved extremely difficult and has resulted in negative attitudes towards the language. As it can be seen, a reform needs to be done in the future to tackle the mentioned issues in order to stop the difficulties in Irish language teaching and learning.

Taking a step back, when facing discrepancies, one must have a look at some historical consequences that had a huge effect on the number of Irish speaking people, starting with potato famine of 1840s followed by vast emigration of the Irish people abroad. According the Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning Ireland is still facing the emigration problem. On one hand, diaspora reduced the number of those Irish speaking migrants, returning home with non-Irish speaking wives but, on the other hand, diaspora also contains many Irish speakers who wish to re-possess the language of their forbearers. Therefore, there are departments of Irish studies at many universities abroad.

To sum up, only future will show the successful or unsuccessful realization of Strategy objectives. Didactics of teaching languages has undergone different phases by applying different methods with less or more positive effects. One thing is sure, however, education has been always playing one of the most prominent roles in fostering cultural heritage of the state, of which the language is the integral part. It means that outside of school it can be fostered further by family units as well as by other significant organizations (Údarás na Gaeltachta, Forás na Gaelige, Conradh na Gaelige, etc.). The attitudes of parents towards language issues can motivate children to keep the language alive as it was stated in the following opinion: „I was positively inclined to Irish language, my sister, my parents spoke Irish language, all was done via Irish language, we had great foundation in Irish language.“ Last but not least, the education process alone needs to reflect new challenges faced by both teachers and students, not excluding the socio-historical context of Irish language development and new tendencies and policy towards its preservation and cultivation.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of the article was to provide the reader with some selected aspects concerning the Irish language teaching in the Republic of Ireland. Firstly, we have outlined the basic legal documents in which the Irish language is defined.

The paper was developed on the basis of the idea that Irish language plays an important role in terms of national and cultural identity of the Irish. We also dealt with new methods and devices used in Irish language teaching and new challenges that Irish language teachers as well as students have to face.

As an important document full of useful data concerning the topic of future development of the Irish language in the future can be considered the document titled 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030 which was the source of immense information about the objectives and activities that are already in process regarding the Irish language. It is only to wait what the future brings in the span of twenty years since the Strategy was initiated.

To sum up, Irish language cultivation and preservation seems to be of utmost importance for the cultural and national identity of the Irish. There are many opinions that without Irish language Ireland would not be Ireland, but a different country. There were several events in the past that influenced the number of Irish speakers negatively, but revival movements of the late 19th and 20th century brought new hope to language movement. On one hand, a lot of migrants are returning back from abroad with the idea to re-possess the Irish language again. On the other hand, many ancestors of Hibernian Irish try to reconnect with their roots in America via establishments of their own virtual Gaeltachts.

Many of our respondents proposed the idea that a reform should be adopted in terms of Irish language teaching. There have been several new innovative methods being incorporated into teaching (like CLIL, although it is not titled like that specifically), there is still a long way ahead before making the number of Irish speakers increased and more students motivated and ready to use Irish outside schools, i.e. at homes or among friends. We hope that the objectives of the 20-Year Strategy will be successfully realized in the period leading up to 2020 given the fact that Irish language is still considered as one of the important elements of Irish cultural and national identity.

To conclude, it would be very difficult, maybe almost a waste of time, to focus only on searching for the best teaching methods which could be effectively applied during Irish language classes. There are a lot of factors we must consider when talking about language learning and teaching. Motivation and attitudes of teachers and students towards the subject play a huge role in determining the success of the teaching process. Sometimes even old-fashioned teaching methods

can be used in a very innovative way. Even an old idea can be transformed into a new one with certain modifications. Maybe the best solution could be found by looking for the way in the middle respecting the old and understanding the new so that something totally unique can be created.

One of the ways how to ensure successful language acquisition could be teaching the language through culture and culture through language so that the students can become aware of their roots and rich cultural heritage they possess as a nation. We have come to the conclusion that language learning intertwines with culture. One without the other cannot exist during language classes. The students must come into grasp with this fact so that they can also answer the question why they study a particular language.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Irish language is the first national and official language. First of all, the students have to understand that language is not a material object. Language is much more. It is part of our spiritual heritage we must look after. If we do not look after language, then it can die very easily. Using a particular language is part of our individual identity. Every word used has got a creative power on us and our environment. Language is a very powerful means. When learning a language, we are also learning about who we are and where we come from. We assume that when learning a language we are also learning the truth about ourselves and our own lives.

When studying Irish, students should be gradually introduced to the issues concerning their roots, heritage, culture and ancestry which can help them understand the question why Irish is a compulsory subject within the curriculum. When students consider learning Irish as a good thing, then they are also treating it well which helps the language revitalization.

The important task of teachers is to motivate the students and wake up their interest in language and deep study of language not only for their future jobs, but also for the sake of their own identity development. To summarize, no language should be minimized to just an economic asset. Language is part of our identity, culture and heritage.

According to Šatava (2013) those who describe the language revitalization efforts as a mere waste of time for something that counts only for a few hundred or a few thousand people, reduce the human existence to only one aspect. All languages spoken in the world generate immense national cultural wealth and help to make their community unique. All languages are crucial and invaluable elements of cultural and linguistic diversity of the world and the spiritual heritage of humankind, therefore should be treated with respect and honour.

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