

## LEARNING IRISH FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE IRISH LANGUAGE SPEECH COMMUNITY OUTSIDE THE GAELTACHT

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Until the early seventies, Irish language pedagogy [ILP] as part of the state's interventionist role in language revival, was seen to constitute a symbiotic strategy for language maintenance, status planning and acquisition planning for the language. But since 1970, has there been a change in state policy for Irish language pedagogy? Is Irish now being taught and learned as an L2, with the objective of achieving a societal bilingualism? To what extent does learning Irish in schools at present guarantee rates of reproduction of sequential bilinguals to ensure consolidation and extension of the speech community -pobal na Gaeilge? Pobal na Gaeilge, as well as including the territorially defined Gaeltachtaí, significantly refers to a growing number of networks of users of Irish outside that regional, territorial and linguistic entity. This paper examines the present requirements for accountability in Irish language pedagogy. [e.g. syllabus, societal bilingualism and state revival policies]. The author argues that Irish language pedagogy needs to address realistically the present focus of revival policy programmes, in order to achieve meaningful and purposeful language learning in the classroom.

Until the early seventies, as has been stated, Irish language pedagogy [ILP] as part of the state's interventionist role in the revival of Irish<sup>1</sup> was seen to constitute a symbiotic strategy for language maintenance, status planning and acquisition planning for the language. Status language planning was characterised by the dual policy of maintenance and revival: maintenance in the Irish

language speech communities and revival in the areas outside the geographically and linguistically defined Gaeltachtaí. (Irish language speech communities)

In status planning outside the Gaeltacht, which will be the concern in this article, the centrality of intergenerational transmission in the processes of revitalization was not stressed or was somewhat overlooked<sup>2</sup> Instead, it was expected that the schools could act as the principal agents of revival. In other words, it was taken for granted that Irish could be revived by an effective system of teaching the language. In fact, it could be said in hindsight that the entire burden of the revival devolved on the education system.<sup>3</sup>

Inherent in the policy of promoting the language in the school was an implicit understanding that, as the national or primary schools were perceived as having been the main agents in effecting a language shift to English, the process could be reversed in favor of Irish. This conviction was reflected, for example in the work of a leading educationalist in the new state, Rev.T.Corcoran, Professor of Education at University College, Dublin, most notably in *Studies* 1925, (386-387), where he wrote:

Can the language be thus given in and through the school as a real vernacular? There is an abundance of historical evidence for an affirmative answer. It was in this way almost entirely that the English vernacular was enabled to replace the Irish tongue in Irish-speaking Ireland. Over large proportions of the country, this process of displacement developed from 1700 onwards through the local schools. It was effective above all from 1830-1850 and these were the years that really counted. The reversal of the process is equally feasible... . The popular schools can give and can restore our native language, they can do it without positive aid from the home.

In 1922 all primary (national) schools were instructed to teach Irish, or to use it as a medium of instruction for at least

half an hour a day. (INTO 1941) Subsequent policies were aimed at extending the use of Irish as a medium of instruction. In this policy-model, teaching Irish was synonymous with learning Irish. With a strong emphasis on grammar and composition, (Dept of Education: *Rialacha agus Cláir* 1924), there was also an implicit assumption that knowledge about language would lead to language use, i.e., if children knew the language that they would then speak it.<sup>4</sup> If students were taught Irish well, on leaving school they would speak it in their homes and in all societal domains, and in this way the language could be revived. So schools needed Irish and Irish needed schools.

Learning Irish in schools outside the Gaeltacht in the early years of the State could be interpreted as being a preparation for participation in the Irish language speech community. It could be said however, that this speech community did not exist in reality, but existed only in the expectant, in the imminent and was being created and forged in and through *the very process of preparation* itself. Ó Huallacháin (1994:116) has referred to this as implementing a policy through educational agencies in isolation because the necessary societal backup for achieving a language shift was not yet in place.

*Tosach maith leath na hoibre.* (A good beginning is half the work). In the beginning all appeared to be going well. The first Minister for Education in the new State, Eoin Mac Néill, who had once advised that the language could not be revived through the agency of the school alone (Mac Néill 1900), reported in 1923, however, that the teaching and learning of Irish was flourishing (Dáil Debates XX1). But half the work was not accomplished in this instance by a good beginning. Teachers soon started to complain as they endeavored to find out why exactly they were teaching the language and notes of despondency were also beginning to be sounded by the Department of Education itself. In its annual report of 1928-1929, the following was stated in reference to teaching Irish:

Outside the *Gaeltacht* the progress in the use of Irish as a medium of instruction is slow...children are not speaking Irish and I regret to say that I see no signs that we will witness a reverse of the situation unless we approach the issue with a different frame of mind.

It appears that the different frame of mind called for in this report was never formulated. Right through the 1930's, 40's, 50's and 60's, while the schools conferred a high status on the language; there was a growing disjunction between the energies invested in learning the language in the classroom and the absence of opportunities outside it for using it meaningfully in a speech community context. The lack of use of Irish as a vernacular outside the Gaeltacht undermined the school/Irish symbiosis and eventually debilitated public motivation towards language learning.

Teaching a language widely and intensively which had no immediate, well-established role or status in the community resulted in poor standards. The return for all the investment and energies expended in Irish were low, producing a situation where, as Comhairle na Gaeilge (1974:3) commented: "In too many ... schools, even after 12 years' instruction, most pupils emerge unable to conduct a simple conversation in Irish."

By the mid-sixties, it was understood and accepted that the language revitalization policy had not worked and the idea that the revival of Irish through reversing language shift would gradually displace English was eventually and formally set aside in the White Paper on the Restoration of the Irish Language. (Government White Paper 1965)

### IRISH IN THE SCHOOLS SINCE 1970

In the early 1970's, there was a change in state policy for Irish language pedagogy. The government in Dublin no longer pursued its policies aimed at the displacement of English by achieving Irish monolingualism (reversing language shift) and the term bilingualism began to be used

thereafter to describe the national aim *vis à vis* language restoration.

Research on language attitudes beginning with the Committee on Language Attitudes Research, (CLAR 1975) made it clear that the public espoused the restoration of Irish, but this restoration was now to occur within the context of a bilingual society. Interestingly enough, this corresponded closely to what the early *Conradh na Gaeilge* (The Gaelic League) language revivalists had originally envisaged (Ó Laoire 1996). A special body, called *Comhairle na Gaeilge*, was appointed in June 1969 to review Irish language policy and advise on its future developments.<sup>5</sup> It identified a new diglossic approach where selected domains of national life would be associated with Irish, *Comhairle na Gaeilge* (1972:7)

This posed a new and important question for Irish language pedagogy policies, namely, outside the Gaeltacht, was Irish now to be taught and learned as an L2, as part of a new strategy towards fostering bilingualism? This question was never fully answered. From the beginning in fact, the implications of this newly-formulated objective of achieving societal bilingualism for Irish language pedagogy were not very clear. Certainly the notion of creating motivation for learning and using Irish was given a new ascendancy. *Comhairle na Gaeilge*, in its document *Irish in Education* (1974:4), highlighted the importance of creating motivation in any new formulation of Irish language pedagogy within the framework of bilingualism. It stated:

It would seem then that an essential part of any Irish language teaching policy would be a continuing review of the set of motivations likely to produce a widespread stimulus towards learning and speaking the language. It may be found that the new diglossia approach recommended by *Comhairle na Gaeilge*--that of associating selected domains of national life with Irish--would itself in time be one of the most important motivating forces in the social sphere, in

that it would provide occasions for using any Irish learned in school.

But it was not immediately obvious what the domains of Irish language use were and how much language should be taught to ensure transactional communication within these domains. Nor were the nature of the language contact and the function of the bilingualism being targeted (balanced, co-ordinate, compound etc.) very clear. Other equally significant issues were also not addressed in Irish language pedagogy policy at the time, issues such as:

- the recruitment factor: capacity of the education system for bilingual reproduction
- integration into bilingual networks

A key aspect in the maintenance of a bilingual minority is its capacity to reproduce a similar sized or an increased sized community for the next generation. The bilingual community must rely significantly on the schools to assist it in this reproductive capacity. In 1986, the CCP (*Coiste Comhairle Pleanála*) [Advisory Planning Committee] an advisory planning committee, in a report on Irish in the education system estimated that the State required each school-going cohort to contain 20%-30% competent bilinguals to maintain the then levels of bilingualism (CCP 1986:ix). The establishment, growth and development of the *naíonraí* (Irish-medium pre-schools) and Irish medium education in recent years are a step in this direction.

A second issue that Irish language pedagogy needs to address is that of issue the spatial distribution and mobility of Irish speakers in Irish speaking- networks. The pattern and nature of bilingualism or of an Irish language speech community outside the Gaeltacht is, of course, best described as being dispersed. This was and continues to be a crucial issue in the development of an effective and significantly relevant Irish language pedagogy- policy. If the school produces competent bilinguals, these bilinguals need to be able to integrate into the Irish speaking clusters or networks outside the schools. Once integrated, Irish language learning has been vindicated as being culturally meaningful and communicatively useful, learners'

interlanguage is stretched and a depth of language processing is furthered.

The question that needed to be answered in the 1970's and still requires to be addressed is: to what extent does learning Irish in schools at present guarantee rates of reproduction of sequential bilinguals to ensure consolidation and extension of the speech community - *pobal na Gaeilge*? This question has not yet been fully addressed, because, the orientation of Irish language pedagogy within the framework of bilingual reproduction may have been side-tracked by two inter-related developments in Irish education in the eighties and nineties: i.e., expansion in post-primary education and subsequent curriculum development.

Expansion and development in post-primary education in the seventies and eighties brought ever-increasing numbers of students into the system. Among these were considerable numbers of less successful or less-academically oriented pupils who had difficulty in adapting to the dominant educational model, Ó Dubhthaigh, (1978), Ó Laoire, (1994), (1997). This resulted in concern about unprecedented rates of failure in Irish in the public examinations and about a general deterioration in standards. In the context of general curriculum reform, the need to introduce new syllabi arose out of such concern and was prompted by the general malaise in the area of Irish language pedagogy.

Most of the eighties and nineties were taken up, therefore, with syllabus reform to make the language more accessible and relevant to all students and to lower the rates of failure. The adoption of communicative-type syllabi in both junior and senior cycle programmes was undertaken deliberately by the NCCA (The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) with this background of malaise and with the objectives of accessibility and relevance in mind. But in implementing these important syllabus-related issues, we may have been side-tracked, albeit necessarily so, and have lost sight of the central issue: how learning Irish prepares us for participation in the Irish language speech community

Irish language speech communities (*Pobal na Gaeilge*), as well as including the territorially defined *Gaeltachtaí*, refers significantly to a growing number of networks of users of Irish *outside* that regional, territorial and linguistic entity both at home and abroad. Unlike the Gaeltacht, where the student of Irish may have the support mechanisms of home and neighborhood domains in sustaining or increasing proficiency through use; the school alone, for the learner of Irish as L2 outside the Gaeltacht, may indeed be the *only* source of language learning. Learning Irish in school all too often is not reinforced by participation in, and integration into the speech community. Irish-speaking networks outside the Gaeltacht have never been sufficiently numerous to form a readily identifiable and easily **visible** speech community. This distribution of Irish speaking networks poses a serious problem for the learner of Irish, particularly within the communicative framework, where the relevance of learning is wholly identified with societal use. For many students, there is no readily identifiable speech community where such communication might be meaningful other than in communicational transactions in the Gaeltacht.

The communicative-type syllabi now being taught in Irish schools imply that learners who have little or no prospect of eventually integrating into or enacting with the Gaeltacht speech community are asked to suspend disbelief as they rehearse communicative situations which can only be authentic or valid within the Gaeltacht.

Efforts in our Irish language classrooms intent on simulating the tourist-type situations so central to communicative pedagogy of more widely used languages have worn thin with many of our learners. It has been my experience that students have seen through the ruse, and that efforts to engage learners' motivation in mimicry of communicative situations, such as booking a room in a hostel in Cork, or asking directions while working from a map of O'Connell St., Dublin, have been doomed to arouse at best a benign indifference, even among our most eager learners. Such an approach is suitable if it is geared towards learners who will want to, or who will have to, or who will

choose to use Irish at some stage in their lives in the Irish language speech community in the Gaeltacht. But does Irish language pedagogy prepare learners to integrate into the Irish language speech community outside the Gaeltacht, if such were their choice?

It is not always easy to communicate or even to know how and when to communicate with Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht. This is often true in the case of adult learners who embark on an adventure of improving their *cúpla focal* (a few words) by attending night classes. Things go well until they try and integrate into a cluster of Irish speakers—then things goes horribly wrong! Learners at this crucial integration-threshold stage often think that their Irish is not good enough and compare their own efforts unfavourably with the standard of the target network-group. Unfortunately, such learners often give up.<sup>6</sup> This points to a need not only for more research into the sociolinguistic and motivational variables of integration but also for preliminary studies of interlanguage pragmatics in the case of Irish speakers. (The latter would be to provide data, for example on the nature of illocutionary acts among speakers belonging to the Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht speech communities)

What should we be teaching our students at primary and at post-primary levels? Is the communicative approach out of place, irrelevant and unhelpful for the majority of our learners who will never come into contact with the *Gaeltacht* speech community?

The CEB (Curriculum and Examination Board) document which preceded syllabus definition argued that the classroom itself must be used to motivate learners at least in the short term (CEB:31), by creating a need to use Irish in the accomplishment of meaningful activities which appeal to their interests and imagination. It states that: 'the classroom is therefore a valid communicative situation, which can in itself be exploited as a valuable resource for learning. To view it merely as a rehearsal studio for the world outside is an approach unlikely to sustain the motivation of many

learners of Irish.' This approach, however, has sustained motivation for many of us teachers in the classroom (Ó Laoire 1994b). The problem with this model, however, is that if school is the only place that Irish is meant to be used, then students, when school is out, forget Irish and see it as something irrelevant. Irish like homework, rules and uniform is best forgotten outside school

A problem in Irish language pedagogy in recent years, therefore has been the tendency for syllabus design and for language revival policies towards achieving societal bilingualism to occur more or less independently of each other. To re-align Irish language pedagogy with revival policies, the organizing principle for syllabus design needs to be more answerable to how, where and why Irish is used in the Irish language speech community Irish language pedagogy needs to address realistically therefore, the present focus of revival policy programs, as well as to empower learners to be more aware of the Irish language context and the process of language learning itself, in order to achieve meaningful and purposeful language learning.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Ó Riagáin, P (1997) for a comprehensive description of the historical background to the development of Irish language revivalist policies, also Ó Riain (1994). See also IJSL 70 (1988) for a discussion on various aspects of policy implementation in status and corpus planning, especially Commins (1988), Tovey (1988) and Ó Baoill (1988). For a discussion of the role of the state in the revival, see Ó Laoire (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Fishman (1991:128) in an analysis of the 1981 Census data refers for example to the glaring failure of Irish language policies in the past to follow-up the well educated who have mastered Irish during school attendance so that, they could more easily form Irish-speaking (or, at least bilingual) speech communities in their post-school years

and, thereby, transmit the Irish which they have acquired to a successive generation.

<sup>3</sup> See Benton (1986) for an interesting discussion on the role of the schools as agents of revival in the Irish and New Zealand contexts. For more information on the role of the Irish language in education from 1831 onwards, see Ó Buachalla (1984), also Ó Riagáin (1997: Chapter 7). Ó Súilleabháin (1988) gives a good account of the historical background to the role of Irish in the schools.

<sup>4</sup> Coolahan (1981:223) notes that the failure of the system to restore the spoken language to any extent can be partly attributed to the stress laid on the written language rather than on oral fluency.

<sup>5</sup> Among Comhairle na Gaeilge's main recommendations was the establishment of an agency with special responsibility for the restoration and maintenance of Irish. This agency, *Bord na Gaeilge*, was established in 1975, becoming a statutory agency in 1978.

<sup>6</sup> One such learner in his late twenties told me in a private communication (as part of a forthcoming research study) that he had taken night classes in Irish for over two years and was reasonably proficient in class. He reported difficulty however, when trying to integrate in to Irish speaking networks *outside* class. He found that some speakers either reverted to English when he joined in conversations or that he, himself said very little and felt uncomfortable, even when he understood the gist of certain conversations and interactions conducted entirely in Irish. He has since abandoned hope of ever being able to speak the language well and to be a part of an Irish speaking network.

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