

A Vision for the Irish Language

Transforming the teaching of Irish and other languages



By **Julian de Spáinn**

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Julian de Spáinn gives us several good reasons to be confident that the Irish language is thriving both at home and abroad. He is anxious however about the survival of the Gaeltacht, that vital area where Irish has been the spoken language of the community for thousands of years. He also presents a well-thought-out solution to problems sometimes associated with learning Irish within our education system.

The Irish language today is in a good place. Almost 2 million people on this island have some level of Irish. Another 2 million people have downloaded and are using Duolingo's Irish language learning app, launched in 2014. You can Google, Gmail, Facebook, Tweet, Instagram and Snapchat, all *as Gaeilge*. Music videos in Irish, produced by TG Lurgan, have had well over 10 million views. International interest in Irish – always stronger than we understand at home – is growing, with many universities around the world teaching Irish, from Poland to Canada and from Australia to Texas. And, in case you hadn't heard, Ed Sheeran recently recorded one of the biggest songs in the world, *Thinking Out Loud*, in Irish!

There is no doubt that we have a huge opportunity to increase the use of Irish amongst those mentioned above – those who have shown an interest in the language, those who have the language, those who are learning the language, and others who are at the start of their learning experience.

Need to ensure the survival of *An Gaeltacht*

While focusing on increasing the numbers of new speakers, and inspiring those who can speak Irish to speak it more often, we must act to ensure the survival of the Gaeltacht. The Gaeltacht is a vital area in which Irish continues to be the spoken language of the community, as it has been for thousands of years. State intervention and support are needed to preserve and protect our most precious cultural resource, but any action being taken in Gaeltacht communities must be adequately funded in order to guarantee success. Languages initiatives undertaken in Gaeltacht areas without long term planning and provision of resources are a recipe for cynicism and defeatism. Proper planning, community involvement, and full investment in agreed strategies can, however – and will – create thriving, vibrant Gaeltacht communities, from which we will all benefit.

Solution to problems with learning Irish in schools

I present here a logical, straightforward, and economically sound solution to the majority of the problems sometimes associated with the learning

of Irish in our education system, based on both best practice and on international expertise. Most of the suggestions could also be used to help us build an education system that excels in language learning in general. We could successfully ensure that the vast majority of school children are not only bilingual in Irish and English, but also have a good command of a third language by the time they leave school.

The benefits of bilingualism are many and well-recognised throughout Europe, with the possible exceptions of the UK and Ireland. More media coverage could help to raise this awareness in Ireland. Here are just five of the benefits:

1. Improved cognitive skills, problem solving, etc. – these, in turn, obviously help with employability, job progression, and life in general
2. Improved listening skills and a heightened ability to monitor the environment
3. Improved aptitude for third/ subsequent language acquisition
4. Improved job opportunities – careers for those with a good command of the Irish language include positions in law, media, medicine, business, translation, education, and many other areas
5. Improved protection against dementia and Alzheimer's in later years.

So how do we teach Irish better, ensure that our school children are bilingual at least in Irish and in English, and reap the huge benefits of bilingualism and further language learning?

Immersion Education

The answer I am putting forward is immersion education, immersion education, immersion education. This is the tried, tested, and successful method for learning languages throughout the world. I mention it thrice to emphasise that it is my belief that the **most important** method of changing language learning in this state should be by immersion education.

Ireland's greatest educator, Pádraig Mac Piarais, went to Belgium in 1906 to learn about immersion education and, on his return, he introduced it in his school, St. Enda's. For him, and for many others active in education at the start of the 20th century, it was clear that the best way to learn a language was to be immersed in it. Now, one hundred years later, it is time to allow the immersion method to reach its full potential in our schools.

We already have full immersion in Ireland in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools, with all subjects being taught through Irish and school activities through Irish. It is recognised that pupils in these schools become proficient in Irish and in English with relative ease. This is recognised by parents who continue to seek Irish-medium education for their children. There are now over 300 Irish-medium schools on the island of Ireland and 70 post-primary schools or units.

Partial immersion

But what about the majority of schools that function through the medium of English? I believe that we should introduce partial immersion, i.e. teaching a number of subjects through Irish and increasing the use of Irish

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in school activities, and gradually extend this system to all schools. Partial immersion is a proven successful method of teaching Irish in Ireland. The rapid improvements produced by Irish language summer colleges in the *Gaeltacht* show what is possible. Every summer young people attend three week courses and return home with the ability to speak Irish fluently and confidently. Imagine what could be done over 16 years if partial immersion were employed from the two years of free pre-schooling to sixth year in secondary schools. Below is a holistic approach that I am proposing to the Department of Education and Skills to support the introduction of immersion education into all our schools on a phased basis:

Primary and Early Years education

The early years can be the most important for language learning and so I recommend the following two proposals:

- » Firstly, partial immersion should start from the two free years of pre-school provided by the state. Young children's minds soak up new words in both their native language and in another language they frequently hear. Partial immersion could be introduced gradually by primary schools and providers of early education by choosing subjects such as art, drama, physical education, or other subjects, and teaching these through the medium of Irish. These subjects would also encourage the children to perceive Irish as a fun means of communication, and not as a difficult school subject.
- » Secondly, I would suggest that this introduction to partial immersion should be accompanied by a language plan for the school. This plan would identify and provide opportunities to use Irish outside of the classroom situation to reinforce and give more context to the subjects being taught through Irish.

Many universities around the world are teaching Irish, from Poland to Canada and from Australia to Texas.

Post-primary education

If we introduce partial immersion to primary and early years education, then we can expect that by the time the children reach second level, they should be able to communicate comfortably through Irish. To cater for their increased ability and knowledge of the language, I recommend the following two proposals:

- » Firstly, the syllabus that all students study to Leaving Certificate should be based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001)*. This means that the students would learn language skills with clear communicative objectives, starting with an increased emphasis on oral and aural skills and progressing to more advanced written skills as the student progresses through the framework. This system would ensure that all students would learn – and be tested – at the level of their own personal ability in the future, instead of following the rigid system in place at the moment. A language awareness course should also be incorporated for all students to increase their awareness of the importance of language learning. This is not currently fostered enough in our schools, or indeed in Ireland generally.
- » Since the revision of the LC marking scheme giving 40% to the oral component of the exam, many people feel there has been a dumbing

down of the standard of Irish necessary to attain a high grade, as very little literature is studied and the written component of the exam is not challenging. This is especially true for native Irish speakers and students with a high standard of Irish in *Gaelcholáistí* or other schools. For those students who have a high ability in Irish already, the change has been the equivalent of giving 50% of the marks in English to an English oral exam and taking most of the literature off the curriculum. These competent Irish speakers need to be catered for and challenged adequately at Leaving Certificate level. This could easily be done by having an optional additional Irish subject for Leaving Certificate with an emphasis on literature, similar to additional subjects such as applied physics. Alternatively there could be a third level in addition to the ordinary and honours levels – let’s call it the *Sárleibhéal* – which would have bonus CAO points for those who choose it, similar to the current system for higher level maths. As the new Junior Cycle specifications include two different specifications for Irish – one for Irish-medium schools and one for English-medium schools – the time is right to follow this with the recommendation above.

Third level education

Initial teacher education at third level should adapt to facilitate this new approach of partial immersion in our schools. This should be done in two ways:

- » Firstly, and at no additional cost, students starting their initial teacher education courses should spend the first two weeks of their course immersed in the language in the Gaeltacht. As part of the course they will spend two weeks in their first year in the Gaeltacht anyway, but this is usually done at Easter or during the following summer. I believe strongly that if the students met each other for the first time through Irish, and spent a period of time getting to know each other whilst using Irish as the medium of communication, they would be encouraged to continue to use Irish when they return to their colleges of education (having been acquainted through the medium of English initially, it is unusual for someone to change their medium of communication to Irish at a later stage). Being immersed and using more Irish right from the start of their course would be a huge advantage for the students developing their Irish language fluency. I also believe that the period spent in the *Gaeltacht* by the students is an essential part of their course and therefore should be funded by the Government.
- » Secondly, the colleges of education should teach all their students how to teach other subjects through Irish, such as art, drama, or physical education. This would ensure that more and more teachers in our schools will be able to use the partial immersion method on a gradual basis. This would give our children the opportunity to become bilingual at least in Irish and in English by the end of their time in school, while also affording them a greater ability to learn another language.

So how do we teach Irish better?

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Languages initiatives undertaken in *Gaeltacht* areas without long term planning and provision of resources are a recipe for cynicism and defeatism.

Déanaimis iarracht níos mó ar son na Gaeilge." President Michael D Higgins

Across all levels

The case I am making requires all levels in the educational system to be addressed in a holistic way. They depend on one another. The change wouldn't happen overnight but gradually over a twenty year period. If the Department followed this new approach, I believe that the teaching of Irish and other languages would be transformed and that huge benefits would be reaped, first and foremost by the children, but also by society as a whole.

Let's stop questioning the status of Irish at Leaving Certificate, and rather see learning Irish as part of a core education that also gives our students the key to learning other languages and accessing all the benefits that accrue to multi-lingual speakers.

As President Michael D Higgins says: "*Déanaimis iarracht níos mó ar son na Gaeilge.*" I couldn't agree more.



At the Conradh na Gaeilge 2016 Ard-Fheis in Dublin Castle:
above, Uachtarán na hÉireann, Micheál D Ó hUiginn addressing the gathering;
below, Uachtarán na hÉireann, Micheál D Ó hUiginn speaking with members of SEO LINN.