



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Note

Paper 26/14

19 December 2013

NIAR 899-2013

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Language Immersion

Abstract

Language immersion is a technique of teaching a second language. In this system of education the learners' second language is the medium used for all classroom instruction. The main purpose of this technique is to promote bilingualism although general cognitive development has also been cited as an advantage of the immersion method.¹

This briefing note gives an overview of the immersion systems used in the Republic of Ireland, Wales and Scotland. It also makes reference the provisions made to inspect schools which adopt the immersion model.

¹ McKendry, E. (2006) *Immersion Education: An Introductory Guide for Teachers* Belfast: Queen's University Belfast

1. The Republic of Ireland

The government has outlined its support for instruction through the medium of Irish. Indeed, the 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 (The Strategy) targets education as one of the key areas for action.²

The Strategy is designed to:

- enhance and extend ability in Irish more deeply and among larger numbers of people;
- reverse negative attitudes towards Irish language usage and foster positive attitudes in their place; and
- expand the available opportunities for use of Irish within the education system by extending Irish as a medium of instruction, as well as a subject

1.1. Partial Immersion

The Strategy proposes a move towards partial Irish language immersion being offered to all children. It is planned to implement this on a phased basis, in line with progress made in strengthening teachers' competences in this area. Ultimately the Strategy proposes that all students in mainstream schools undertaking the Irish language as a core subject will be offered the experience of partial immersion education in other subjects.

1.2. Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools

Irish-medium schools are being set up on a steady and continual basis, thus increasing the number of pupils who register with Irish-medium schools every year. In 2012-13, there were 378 primary schools which provided education through the medium of Irish, 132 of which are located in Gaeltacht areas. The post-primary sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools and there are Irish-medium providers each of these categories. In 2012-13, there were 73 post-primary schools which provided education through the medium of Irish.³

There is a national policy of promoting immersion education in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools (gaelscoileanna) and preschools (naíonraí). Schools are permitted to postpone formal English language instruction until the end of term 1 of Senior Infants (age 5). At primary level, a separate Irish curriculum for Gaeltacht schools and gaelscoileanna has been developed.

The Government acknowledges the specific difficulty of accommodating the needs of pupils with diverse linguistic abilities in Gaeltacht schools. This can be complicated further depending on the status of the Irish language within the community. It is

² The Government of Ireland (2010) *The 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* Dublin

³ Information provided by the Inspectorate December 2013

acknowledged that teaching resources are a major issue for Gaeltacht schools, both at primary and secondary level.⁴

In 2010⁵ the Education Research Centre announced that the standard of English and mathematics in Irish-medium schools was above the national average. This was the first time that the majority of Irish-medium and Gaeltacht primary schools were assessed on their achievement levels in English and mathematics as an independent cohort.

In September 2013 the Department of Education and Skills published a document which outlines a proposal to review educational provision in the Gaeltacht.⁶ The resultant policy options for educational provision are due for completion during the 2nd quarter of 2014.

1.3. Inspection

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills operates a programme of school evaluations across all schools (including Irish-medium schools) in accordance with the provisions of the Education Act (1998) section 13. The inspectorate deploys a range of models, from a one-day unannounced Incidental Inspection to a more intensive whole-school evaluation process. The former is focussed on the teaching and learning experiences on a given day and it does not result in a published report. The latter examines the quality of key aspects of a school's work; including, management, leadership, teaching and learning, including supports for pupils.

Proficiency in Irish is among the criteria used in the appointments of both primary and post-primary inspectors. Primary inspectors with a high standard of linguistic proficiency in the Irish language, both oral and written, are selected to conduct the whole-school evaluations of Irish-medium schools. These evaluations are conducted through Irish and the evaluation reports are written in Irish. An English translation is also provided to facilitate parents and other members of the school community who may not have sufficient fluency to read the report in Irish.⁷

Post-primary inspectors are specialists in specific aspects of the curriculum, for example Geography or Science inspectors. There are five Irish specialist inspectors at this level. They are responsible for inspecting the subject of Irish but they also participate in inspection teams for whole-school type evaluations.

There is an expectation that inspectors working in Irish-medium schools conduct their business through Irish and the Inspectorate has in place a professional development programme to enable inspectors to develop and maintain their proficiency in Irish. This

⁴ The Government of Ireland (2010) *The 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* Dublin

⁵ Educational Research Centre (2010) *The 2010 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics in Irish-Medium Schools* Dublin: ERC

⁶ Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Review of Education in the Gaeltacht* Dublin :DES

⁷ Information provided by the Inspectorate December 2013

includes attendance at Irish language courses and immersion experiences in Gaeltacht areas.⁸

2. Scotland

Gaelic medium education (GME) endorses the principles of Scottish curriculum while immersing pupils in the Gaelic language. GME spans pre-school, primary and secondary education. The philosophy underpinning GME involves total immersion until P3/4 with the purpose of giving children a strong foundation in Gaelic language skills at an early stage. This is followed by an immersion phase, during which the entire curriculum continues to be delivered through the medium of Gaelic but which also introduces reading and writing in English. The immersion phase continues into secondary.⁹

There are two central aims to GME immersion:

- feel equally confident in the use of Gaelic and English
- be able to use both Gaelic and English in a full range of contexts within and outside school.

Education Scotland states that children need not have any prior knowledge of the language to attend early years or primary school Gaelic provision. Indeed, parents also need not have any knowledge of Gaelic to enrol their child and they need not be committed to learning Gaelic themselves. A child with no Gaelic can enrol in GME at Primary 1.¹⁰

2.1. Inspections

As part of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, Education Scotland has made a commitment on how it will inspect and promote Gaelic. This is manifested in the document entitled *Arrangements for inspecting schools in Scotland*.¹¹ The document states that the inspection of Gaelic medium schools forms an integral part of inspection's core purpose; 'to improve outcomes for all Scottish learners'.

Education Scotland states that all educational centres that deliver Gaelic provision will, as far as possible, have a Gaelic-speaking HM Inspector or Associate Assessor on the inspection team.¹² The school principal is tasked with ensuring that information relating to Gaelic is incorporated into all inspection scoping activities.

Inspectors examine the quality of young people's experiences and outcomes. They also evaluate the success of the educational centre in improving the quality of Gaelic

⁸ Information provided by the Inspectorate December 2013

⁹ Education Scotland *Gaelic Medium Education* available online www.educationscotland.gov.uk/earlyyearsmatters/fi/genericcontent_tcm4674214.asp

¹⁰ As above

¹¹ Education Scotland (2011) *Arrangements for inspecting schools in Scotland* Edinburgh: ES

¹² Information provided by HMI Scotland December 2013

education. In the case of Gaelic Medium provision, this includes looking at the educational centre's implementation of the principles of immersion. The evidence gathered in relation to Gaelic provision contributes to the overall evaluations. The inspection also highlights what the educational centre does well and where it needs to improve its Gaelic provision.

Gaelic is the medium of communication during inspections of Gaelic Medium schools. This means, for example, using Gaelic while visiting classrooms, talking to young people and their teachers about learning, and when conducting meetings. All inspections use questionnaires to gather and analyse the views of children, parents, staff and other people who are involved with the young people. These questionnaires are available in Gaelic. Letters to parents are also translated into Gaelic.¹³

3. Wales

3.1. Welsh-medium education

Welsh-medium education provides opportunities for children and young people to achieve fluency in the Welsh language through studying a broad range of subjects and disciplines in Welsh. English skills are also developed in English lessons and through experiencing some aspects of the curriculum in English.

3.2. Bilingual education

In some areas of Wales, the provision of bilingual education is the norm. However, bilingual education varies across Wales. In some areas a large proportion of the curriculum is delivered through the medium of Welsh. In other places only a few subjects within the curriculum or a very small number of lessons are taught through the medium of Welsh.

3.3. Welsh Medium Education Strategy

The Welsh Assembly published the Welsh Medium Education Strategy in 2010, setting five-year and ten-year targets. This Strategy sets the Welsh Assembly Government's national strategic direction. An accompanying Implementation Programme details the expectations.

Strategic Aims

The Welsh Medium Education Strategy has six strategic aims:

- **Strategic aim 1:** To improve the planning of Welsh-medium provision in the pre-statutory and statutory phases of education, on the basis of proactive response to informed parental demand

¹³ Education Scotland (2011) *Arrangements for inspecting schools in Scotland* Edinburgh: ES

- **Strategic aim 2:** To improve the planning of Welsh-medium provision in the post-14 phases of education and training, to take account of linguistic progression and continued development of skills
- **Strategic aim 3:** To ensure that all learners develop their Welsh-language skills to their full potential and encourage sound linguistic progression from one phase of education and training to the next
- **Strategic aim 4:** To ensure a planned Welsh-medium education workforce that provides sufficient numbers of practitioners for all phases of education and training, with high-quality Welsh language skills and competence in teaching methodologies
- **Strategic aim 5:** To improve the central support mechanisms for Welsh-medium education and training
- **Strategic aim 6:** To contribute to the acquisition and reinforcement of Welsh-language skills in families and in the community

3.4. Welsh-medium Education Strategy: Annual report 2012–13

Despite much activity, there has been little progress made against the strategy's targets. For example, it is unlikely that 25 per cent of seven-year-old children will be taught through the medium of Welsh by 2015. While there has been significant progress in the percentage of Year 9 learners assessed in Welsh first language, it has proved challenging to persuade older pupils to continue to speak Welsh. Indeed, the number of learners choosing Welsh at A-Level as a first language continues to cause concern to the Welsh-medium sector.¹⁴

3.5. Inspections

As a result of the Welsh-medium Education Strategy 2010, Welsh language provision has been incorporated within the Estyn Common Inspection Framework since 2010. Welsh-medium forms an integral part of the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF). The Quality and Effectiveness Framework for post-16 learning includes consideration of Welsh-medium and bilingual provision, with specific requirements integrated into self-assessment guidance to providers. Furthermore, Inspectors allocated to inspect Welsh-medium schools must be fluent in Welsh. This ensures that inspectors are able to conduct oral the in Welsh.¹⁵

¹⁴Welsh Government (2013) *Welsh-medium Education Strategy: Annual report 2012–13* Cardiff: Welsh Government

¹⁵ Information provided by Estyn December 2013