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Languages in Northern Ireland **Education: A Brief Overview**

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Abstract

This article reviews some relevant aspects of modern foreign language education policy and provision in Northern Ireland, as presented at the conference organised by the Queen's University of Belfast under the auspices of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS)¹. It explores some key shifts in uptake and considers the policy implications of such shifts over the past several decades.

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Introduction

Although its education system has a number of features that distinguish it from Great Britain, Northern Ireland has developed a 'step by step' policy with respect to educational changes introduced by central government for England and Wales (McEwen & Salters, 1995). Scotland has long had its own distinctive education system. So, the Education Reform Act of 1988 (HMSO, 1988) in England was followed by the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order in 1989 (HMSO, 1989). Nevertheless, the Northern Ireland education system has a number of features that distinguish it from Great Britain. In particular, academic selection at age 11, introduced through the Education Acts of the 1940s and mostly abandoned in favour of a comprehensive system in Britain in the 1960s, has been

¹ A full account of the conference discussion is provided by the same authors in the *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 4, No. 11, September 2014, http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_11_September_2014/2.pdf.

retained in Northern Ireland. The Transfer Test, popularly called the 11+ examination, divides pupils between the roughly 30-35% who are accepted into Grammar schools, and the rest who attend Secondary, formerly called 'Intermediate', schools, with a few Comprehensive schools. While the secondary schools are mixed ability and many achieve very good GCSE results and some offer A-levels, they cater in general for the less-academically inclined pupils, and also for a generally lower income population. This is seen in the Free School Meals statistics (Shuttleworth, 1995). As well as pupil capabilities, however, parental aspiration, large-scale coaching, and Bernstein's educability (1970) all play a role in success in the selection examinations. The selection arrangements for transfer are currently under review.

Another distinguishing feature is the religious divide in education. State or controlled Primary, Grammar and Secondary schools cater predominately for the Protestant community, while the Maintained sector makes similar provision for the Catholic community. There is also the Integrated sector, which was set up in the 1970s to promote more harmonious relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities through educating children together. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order of 1989 requires the Department of Education to 'encourage and facilitate Integrated Education' (HMSO, 1989). The post-primary Integrated sector is non-selective, and attracts pupils who fail to get a Grammar school place. The number of pupils attending Integrated schools is circa 6% (NICIE). Finally, Irish-medium schools have emerged in Northern Ireland over the last 30 years, with, for instance over 4000 pupils by 2009 attending Irish-medium nursery, primary and post-primary schools (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta).

The general position of the Irish language in Northern must also be taken into account. As an indigenous minority language, it has no equivalent in England, although it can be compared to some extent with the so-called community languages in Britain, Urdu, Chinese, etc., a population which has recently become a factor in Northern Ireland as well (McKendry, 2002), particularly since EU expansion in 2004, and of course Irish can be compared with Welsh in Wales and Gaelic in Scotland (CILT, 2006). A problem for Irish is that while in the Catholic community there exists a widespread, but not universal, belief in the validity and importance of Irish, there is in contrast an enduring suspicion and antipathy surrounding the language among the wider Unionist, Protestant community, to the extent that the language was dubbed the 'green litmus test' of community relations (Cultural Traditions Group, 1994). Unfortunately, other than a few Integrated schools, not a single non-Catholic school appears to offer Irish.

Northern Ireland Curriculum – Post-Primary

It is somewhat surprising to realise that before the introduction of the National and Northern Ireland Curricula, the only compulsory subject in schools was Religious Education, although society's expectations and the examination system produced the curriculum we were familiar with. All schools also offered English, Science, Mathematics, and a range of other subjects. But until the 1960s in the UK, 'the learning of languages had been the preserve of the Grammar schools' (Moys, 1966). The emergence of comprehensive schools in Britain in the 1960s

gradually led to a 'Languages for All' policy with languages made available across the ability range in post-primary schools.

In Northern Ireland, the retention of the Grammar/Secondary divide meant that it was traditionally the Grammar school minority of pupils who primarily studied a second language, mostly French, although Irish was commonly taught in Maintained Secondary schools, as well as in all Catholic Grammar schools. Although the 'Languages for All' philosophy was adopted in Northern Ireland's post-primary schools as well, it was only moderately successful. In Britain, "for many pupils the experience of language learning did not incline them to continue once the subject became optional, and around 70% of all pupils abandoned the learning of a foreign language by the age of fourteen" (Moys, 1996).

In Northern Ireland, the drop-off was notable in the non-Grammar schools. The Northern Ireland Inspectorate reported in 1990 that while a majority of pupils embarked upon language studies in Year 1 post-primary, by Year 3 only one-quarter of these schools provided modern languages for all pupils (DENI, 1990). But the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order of 1989 laid the ground for the gradual introduction of a common Northern Ireland Curriculum. From 1992 languages became mandatory for all pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 (up to GCSE at age 16). The original intention was that a foreign language, chosen from French, German or Spanish (and later Italian), must be studied, after which Irish could be offered. This would have led to the marginalization and eventual disappearance of Irish from many schools, particularly in the Secondary (non-selective) sector as many schools there could not maintain provision of two languages. As stated in the 1988 DENI consultation paper "The Way Forward", the rationale was utilitarian, intending to ensure "that Northern Ireland pupils, no less than their peers in the rest of the United Kingdom, should be able to compete as equals with their European counterparts in an increasingly international job market" (DENI, 1988).

It is important to recall today that languages were introduced for the sake of the economy, not for cultural or personal interest reasons. This calls into question the wisdom of current patterns where German is disappearing from schools in Northern Ireland and across Great Britain. The government was eventually persuaded to move, grudgingly, on the position of Irish and the then Minister of Education, Dr Mawhinney, announced that the legislation would "require all secondary schools to provide one or more of French, German, Spanish or Italian, so that all pupils will have the option available to them in their own school to acquire competence in one of these major European Community working languages. A school may, if it wishes, offer Irish in addition to these" (Mawhinney, 1989).

While this improved upon the original proposals, it meant nevertheless that many secondary schools had to stop offering Irish in order to provide one of the mainland European languages. From 1992, every post-primary pupil studied a language from 11 to 16, up to GCSE, although it was not a requirement that every pupil should take the GCSE examination. The National and Northern Irish Curricula were strictly prescriptive. Programmes of study were devised for each subject. The modern languages specifications followed a common Functional Notional syllabus for all the languages, regardless of linguistic particularities, and was based upon a version of Communicative Language Teaching which paid little

attention to linguistic form. Around the same time, the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland undertook a programme of monitoring and research. A major research project was carried out in collaboration with the National Foundation for Educational Research between 1996 and 2000. It was designed to investigate the views of Key Stage 3 pupils (age 11-14) and their teachers on the curriculum. In summary, the project results suggested that pupils considered that the curriculum lacked balance and breadth and should be more relevant and enjoyable. The project report (Murphy, 2009) suggested that teachers felt that there was too much emphasis on content. Language education was not positively viewed by respondents, and both Modern Languages and the Creative Arts were consistently seen as the subjects “least useful” for the future. They were also perceived as the least important for pupils’ current needs (CCEA, 2002a). Pupils perceived Modern Languages to be the most difficult area of the curriculum and its level of difficulty increased year-on-year throughout the key stage, especially in grammar schools (CCEA, 2002a). The follow-up report on the Key Stage 4 cohort reported pupils’ views that “Languages were thought to be not useful” (CCEA, 2002b), while on continuity and progression, “Irish doesn’t, but the rest follow-on” (CCEA, 2002b). In addition to the NFER studies, other emerging influences included studies on thinking skills and neuroscience, ICT initiatives, European trends and advice from the business and employment sector. Taking these concerns into consideration, CCEA set about designing the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum. After consultation, proposals for review of curriculum and assessment at Key Stage 3 were published in 2003 as Pathways (CCEA 2003a). These were extremely radical and it was not until 2006 that the revisions to the Northern Ireland Curriculum were published (HMSO, 2006). In the meantime there had also been a process of curriculum review in Britain which took on board many of the innovative proposals of Pathways, but progressed more coherently from the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2007).

Phased implementation of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum started in September 2007. The curriculum is summarised in *The Big Picture* (CCEA, 2007a) where traditional subjects are now arranged into Areas of Learning, one of which is Modern Languages. The revised curriculum:

aims to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives [...] as an individual, a contributor to the economy and the environment. This is to be achieved by introducing Learning for Life and Work (in all areas of learning), comprising Personal Development, Home Economics, Local and Global Citizenship and Employability. (CCEA, 2007a)

In contrast to the close specification of the previous curriculum, the revised curriculum is much more open to individual interpretation and is summarised on one page (CCEA, 2007d). Each subject strand in the curriculum is set out in terms of how it contributes to the core objectives of the revised curriculum. The statutory curriculum for each subject strand is set out as ‘Statements of Minimum Requirement’ and makes reference to ‘Key Elements’ of the curriculum such as Mutual Understanding, Ethical Awareness and Education for Sustainable

Development. The statements of minimum requirement are the compulsory elements of the curriculum in terms of knowledge and understanding, curriculum objectives, key elements and learning outcomes which must be taught. Aside from these statements, teachers can choose the content they feel best suits their school and pupil context. This individual focus and flexibility immediately raises questions about assessment. GCSE examinations are still to be taken at the end of KS4 and new specifications for GCSE were published by CCEA for first teaching from September 2009, with first award in 2011. The GCSE examination was traditionally a summative assessment, an Assessment of Learning (AoL). The revised curriculum places great store however on Assessment for Learning (AfL). AfL is encouraged by the Revised Curriculum through building a more open relationship between learner and teacher, with clear learning intentions, peer and self-assessment, peer and self-evaluation of learning, and individual target setting. It is not, however, statutory:

While the Revised Curriculum does not require you to integrate AfL practices into your classroom(s), we strongly recommend the use of AfL as best practice. The introduction and regular use of AfL in the classroom can help you to fulfil other statutory components of the Revised Curriculum (like Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities.). In addition, AfL offers significant advantages for pupils. (CCEA, 2007b)

A substantial element of controlled assessment was introduced, marked by the teacher and moderated by CCEA, to reflect the individual pupil and the flexibility of the revised curriculum. The Controlled Assessment consists of two units (Speaking and Writing) worth 30% each.

GCSE Choices

The numbers of pupil entries to GCSE and post-16 examinations are recognised as useful indicators of language study health and outcomes in our schools. Such outcomes should be seen in a wider perspective. The 2000 Nuffield Languages Inquiry reports that, in terms of linguistic competence, the UK is 'doing badly'. As each language valiantly fights its own corner, we are losing the greater battle:

We talk about communication but don't always communicate. There is enthusiasm for languages but it is patchy. Educational provision is fragmented, achievement poorly measured, continuity not very evident. In the language of our time, there is a lack of joined-up thinking. (Nuffield, 2000)

This holds true for Northern Ireland as well. However, the most significant development in the last decade has been that languages are no longer compulsory at Key Stage 4 (age 14-16). This has been the case in England since 2002 and in Northern Ireland since 2007. In other words, pupils are now only required to do 3 years of modern language study in post-primary education – the lowest compulsory language education in Europe.

There is still an area within the curriculum called 'Modern Foreign Languages' (MFL) in England, 'Modern Languages' in Northern Ireland to allow for Irish. But within this area, there are the competing language subjects of

French, German, Spanish, Irish (sometimes Italian), where the various languages are often joined in an internecine competition for a shrinking slice of a crowded timetable. One is reminded of the Irish phrase ‘Cogadh na gCarad’ – the War of Friends, Civil War.

If Nuffield identified a lack of ‘joined-up thinking’ in 2000, the Curriculum Review process since that date suggests policy contradiction. The 1980s and 1990s promoted ‘Languages for All’ and ‘Diversification’ (Neil and McKendry, 2006), but Curriculum Review portends a U-turn. Languages are no longer compulsory at Key Stage 4. Developments such as the internet in particular and globalisation in general have led more people to believe that ‘English is Enough’ and languages have lost out in a more crowded timetable, competing with new elements such as Citizenship, Learning for Life and Work, etc., and often being blocked on the timetable against more ‘popular’ subjects. It would also be naïve to believe that the whole staffroom shares the linguists’ concerns about the pressure on languages. Since Northern Ireland has retained selection at age 11, the Grammar/Secondary school divide remains. In most Secondary school (and increasingly, Grammar school) staff rooms you will find teachers who welcome languages becoming optional, since many pupils find languages difficult and results at GCSE are relatively poor. This includes many language teachers who find teaching to less able, demotivated pupils stressful and a strain. The way in which the so-called ‘Communicative Approach’ to language teaching, as it was enshrined in our programmes of study, has become boring and burdensome for pupils across the ability range is partly to blame for this. As we have seen, there are poor attitudes towards language education in the NFER/CCEA longitudinal research, derived mostly on pupils’ views.

We have seen the overall drop in languages nationally in the UK, and locally in Northern Ireland, but while the general trends are similar there are some important local differences which make the Northern Ireland experience significant. First of all, as stated, we still have the 11+, with selection at age 11. The successful pupils go to grammar schools, which have always had a strong reputation for supporting languages. Other pupils go to secondary schools where the language tradition has not been so strong. Since languages became optional in Northern Ireland in 2007, there has been an almost calamitous withdrawal from languages in Secondary schools in particular at age 14. Most alarmingly, grammar schools are now beginning to withdraw from requiring all pupils to study languages in Key Stage 4, age 14-16. This letter was received recently from a Grammar school headmaster:

As a committed European and a committed linguist I am increasingly concerned at the rapid drop in interest in the “traditional” modern languages and I know this concern is shared by other grammar school principals. We are beginning to wonder if, for example, French still deserves to hold a slot in the regular timetable, or should it be offered as an extra-curricular activity. I hear students question why we are not offering Polish and they argue that it would be more useful to them than French. As schools move on to provide the 24 subjects at GCSE and 27 at A level (which will be required by law from 2013) perhaps modern languages will struggle to attract the interest of pupils who have other options available to them. Maybe it’s time to inject a fresh approach, to

give pupils “tasters” of other European and world languages, to help them appreciate the relevance and value of certain languages – rather than force-feeding French and producing the resistance so evident in so many schools these days.

Despite the overall drop, we have seen more than a one hundred per cent increase in Spanish GCSE in Northern Ireland over the two decades, and a one third increase nationally. The reasons are many: many attractive aspects of life and travel in Spain, the Spanish government policy of promoting Spanish globally, and the belief that Spanish is easier than other languages. “El español es fácil” is the slogan, with the subtext that other languages are more difficult. The influence of local stakeholders is also crucial and this would appear to have been the case for Spanish in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately this can sometimes work to the detriment of multilingualism or intercultural respect. I had the misfortune some years ago to be in a coffee queue behind a local Hispanist academic and an education board languages officer who were discussing how Spanish could be promoted in our schools. To my horror, one of them said, to the enthusiastic agreement of the other: “The problem is Irish: if we could get rid of it!”

Primary

There is a movement to promote primary languages in the United Kingdom. In England, all KS2 pupils have been entitled to study a foreign language since 2010. In Northern Ireland “the opportunity to become aware of languages other than our own as a voluntary part of the primary curriculum can provide a valuable social, educational and cultural experience for children” (CCEA, 2007c). Several primary language initiatives have been implemented through the Education and Library Boards. The main focus since 2008 is on a peripatetic project for Spanish (ETI, 2009). When the author asked one of the board officials concerned why French was being ignored in the project, the answer was: “French has had its chance. It’s time to do something else”. This extreme view does not favour multilingualism, although the project now includes Irish and, in the goal of inclusivity, Polish for local children. The difficulty about this is that since this policy was introduced, many of the Polish children have now gone back to Poland.

Higher Education

Moving from primary to Higher Education, one need simply mention that the author’s home university recently closed its German department. This can be considered in the context of a national concern over falling numbers and funding provision for modern languages in Higher Education. This concern has led to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioning a review of the health of ML in English higher education which makes recommendations to ensure the long-term sustainability and vitality of languages provision in the higher education sector (Worton, 2009).

Conclusion

An overview of languages provision could aspire to cover lifelong language learning, from the cradle to the grave, as promoted in the European Union’s Lifelong Learning Programme. An integrated overview would also suggest a

strategy. Indeed, a Language Strategy for England was introduced in 2002. Strategies have also been produced for Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland, however, is still waiting for the publication of its own Languages Strategy, which has been brewing since 2006. This document, when it eventually appears, will be a focus in the future for the attention of language educators.

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