

Impact Case Study

UoA 28A: Modern Languages & Linguistics (Celtic Studies)

Language Policy and Planning in Northern Ireland

Research carried out within the Irish and Celtic Studies Research Institute has had a direct impact upon government policy in Northern Ireland and has led to major benefits for the community. Our research into language rights, language and identity, the Irish language in Northern Ireland and minority languages in general has underpinned our collaboration with government in the development of language policy. This collaboration has resulted in our participation in a thorough examination of education through the medium of Irish: *Review of Irish-Medium Education* (RIME) and our development of a comprehensive languages strategy for Northern Ireland: *Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy* (NILS). The implementation by government of the recommendations contained in these reports has impacted significantly on the community. Our research has had a major impact in the area of education, in particular Irish-Medium education (IME), but also in relation to the business sector and social cohesion.

A significant body of practical and theoretical research in the area of language policy and planning has been developed over many years within the Irish and Celtic Studies Research Institute. The publications of Nic Craith, Mac Mathúna, Ó Corráin and de Brún in the area of minority languages, language politics, language rights and linguistic identity, and research developed in a number of published doctoral theses on language conflict and migrant languages have directly influenced our recommendations to government. Indeed, the above research led directly to our being invited by government to participate in the review of Irish-Medium education and to develop a comprehensive languages strategy for Northern Ireland.

De Brún's research (in particular 2006) highlighted the failure of statutory agencies in Northern Ireland to engage fully with the Irish-medium education sector, having failed to appreciate its significance as a progressive movement for cultural and social regeneration. This was a vital contribution to establishing the context for the Review, namely the need to address a deficiency in public policy towards the Irish language and its rapidly increasing educational sector. Accordingly, one of the Review's key recommendations proposed that the Department of Education should "ensure that Irish-medium education is considered systemically throughout policy development" (See *Review of Irish-Medium Education Report* p.xxi). Acting directly on this recommendation, the Minister for Education established a Standing Group on Irish-Medium Education chaired at under-secretary level and all policy branches are now required to make sure that Irish-medium education is embedded in the policy development process from the outset.

The work carried out by Nic Craith (2003, 2006, 2010) on the importance of official status for languages, along with research published by an ICSRI doctoral student, *Language and Conflict in Northern Ireland: a Silent War* (Janet Muller, 2010) underpinned our recommendations in *Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy* (NILS) in particular that the provisions of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages must be fully implemented in Northern Ireland (see NILS pp. 55, 57, 59); and research carried out by another ICSRI doctoral student and subsequently published, *Migrant Languages in the Public Space: A Case Study from Northern Ireland* (McDermott, 2011) led directly to our recommendations on immigrant languages (NILS p. 58). This underlying research is distilled into *Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy* (NILS) published by the Department of Education (DENI) in 2012. NILS, which was launched by the Minister for Education on 16 November 2012 (minister's speech at <http://news.ulster.ac.uk/podcasts/ODowd.mp3>), provides a comprehensive investigation of the

current state of languages in Northern Ireland and makes 39 recommendations as to how languages can be promoted as a key skill for life, within the educational sector, within the business sector and as an important element of social cohesion. The immediate research contained in the report was carried out between 2006 and 2011 by Ó Corráin (ICSRI, Ulster University), Gillespie (Ulster University) and Johnston (QUB). Our recommendations were underpinned by research into public attitudes towards languages, information being gathered by means of public consultations with stakeholders and key interest groups (see NILS pp. 74-77), and through questionnaires placed on the NILS website (the main questionnaire being made available in 15 different languages). In total, 1,402 questionnaires were completed, providing quantitative and qualitative information used in the strategy. This public-focussed research was published in our report, a key finding being that a large majority of respondents are in favour of language learning commencing within the educational system at as young an age as possible (NILS p. 14) with strong support being expressed for the introduction of modern languages into the primary curriculum (NILS p. 20).

Further examples of the impact of our research can be demonstrated in the implementation of key points from the *Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy* (NILS) and the *Review of Irish-Medium Education* (RIME). These include:

- The Northern Ireland Languages Council being established with representatives of 20 organisations from the business sector, community organisations and the education sector;
- A new Sign Language Interpreter Course at Belfast Metropolitan College
- Extension of the Department of Education's Primary Languages Programme
- £1 million additional resources for the IME sector through CCEA
- £80k funding for the Irish-language youth sector,
- Increased PGCE places for post-primary and accredited training for pre-school teachers
- £230,000 in funding to support programmes to encourage children, parents and the wider community to develop their Irish language skills



Professor Alastair Adair, and Professor Ailbhe Ó Corráin with Education Minister John O'Dowd, Professor John Gillespie and Professor David Johnston (QUB) at the launch of the Northern Ireland Languages Strategy at the Belfast campus

Recommended Action 9.2

That steps be taken to ensure that all languages, spoken and signed, are valued within society, and that mother tongue maintenance is supported.

British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL)

In March 2004, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced recognition of BSL and ISL as languages in their own right. He also announced that the NI Departments would work together, in partnership with representatives of the deaf community, to develop ideas for improving access to public services by users of sign languages.

Although Northern Ireland currently has around 5000 users of sign language¹⁴⁵, we have only eight sign language tutors qualified to NVQ level 3 and two qualified to level 4. To be in line with other European countries, there is a need for at least 40.



¹⁴⁵ Hands-on Partnership, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/index/languages/sign_language.htm