
“When can you ask why?”
**Exploring language policy choices in Ireland,
past, present and future**

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Overview

- With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that the initial policies of the Irish Free State to teach through the medium of Irish were, in principle, appropriate. However, the goals of these policies did not come to fruition because:

(a) research was not carried out to dispel the assumption among teachers and parents that children educated through Irish would suffer adverse consequences in English and other subjects; this led to a steady decline in the number of gaelscoileanna between 1940 and 1970; and

(b) the policies failed to *mobilise identities* in favour of learning Irish either in the classroom or in the wider community.

In classrooms where Irish was taught as a subject, students often never learned enough of the language to *use* it in a way that would affirm their identity.

In the wider community, attempts to mobilise identities in favour of the language (e.g., through slogans such as *gan teanga, gan tír*) often backfired because they consigned the majority of the population who had not gained fluency in the language to an outsider status with respect to Irish identity.

- In the discipline of language planning, we need to give *identity planning* equal weight to corpus planning and status planning.

Irish Language Policy: Past

- Initial policy established in 1922 and articulated again in 1926 and 1931 aimed to teach infant and primary school children “as far as possible” through the medium of Irish.
“The aim of the programme [for primary schools] is to secure the full use of Irish as the teaching medium in all schools as soon as possible” (quoted in O’Doherty, 1958a).
 - The apparent success of this policy is reflected in the fact that by the late 1930s there were almost 300 Irish-medium primary schools outside the *Gaeltacht*.
 - However, this number declined to under 20 by the early 1970s.
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Irish Language Policy: Past

- However, concurrent with the growth of gaelscoileanna were increasing doubts among teachers and parents about the wisdom of teaching students from English-speaking homes through the medium of Irish.
- **INTO (1941):** *Report of Committee of Inquiry into The Use of Irish as a Teaching Medium to Children Whose Home Language is English:*

More than 80% of infant school teachers "stated that their pupils did not derive benefit from instruction through the medium of Irish equal to that which they would derive were English the medium used. ... Generally, the replies would go to show that the experience of the teachers concerned was that the vast majority of the pupils do not receive anything like equal benefit from instruction through the medium of Irish, as compared with instruction through the medium of English". (p. 18)

"...over 77 percent of those replying are of opinion that it is possible to revive Irish without using it as a teaching medium in subjects other than itself". (p. 58)

Irish Language Policy: Past

- E. F. O'Doherty (1958a, 1958b) argued strongly against use of Irish as a medium of instruction for English-speaking pupils, particularly those of lesser scholastic ability:

“...the top-flight secondary school pupils...would do well in any scholastic or academic environment, and would benefit from instruction in Latin, Irish, English or any language”. (1958b, p. 264)

“... a child who suddenly discovers ... a total or partial breakdown in communication may suffer (and very often does suffer) a loss of orientation and self-confidence which may result in a temporary suspension of all development, personality and linguistic. ... Or to put it more simply, the initial failure of the child because of the language barrier to identify himself with the group leads to a lack of security, a sense of unrest ... It may also lead to more serious psychiatric consequences”. (1958b, p. 267)

- O'Doherty also says, however, that “there can be no doubt that genuine bilingualism is an asset” but “the value, like the life, of a language depends exclusively on the use made of it”. (p. 264)

If We Knew Then What We Know Now...

- Teaching L2 as a subject typically yields disappointing results for a large majority of students except in situations where there is extremely high motivation to learn the language and/or significant exposure outside school (e.g., these conditions are often met when English is the target language).
- **Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (1975):**
Those who received Irish-medium instruction in their school years were *ten* times more likely to be now using Irish intensively than those who had studied Irish as a subject only.
- **Evans (1976) on Welsh:**
"To state the matter bluntly, this policy, at least until quite recently, has been a disastrous failure. Even minority Welsh speaking elements in these second language schools [i.e., English-medium with Welsh taught for 30 minutes per day] frequently failed to retain their natural bilingualism and lapsed into becoming monoglot English-speakers." (pp. 54-55)

The major problematic assumption in teaching languages as subjects is the misconception that we first have to learn the language and only then can we think about using it. Under these circumstances students frequently never cross the threshold to using the target language in a way that is identity-affirming.

If We Knew Then What We Know Now...

- Various forms of carefully planned L2-medium teaching yield much better outcomes without adverse effects on L1, or content knowledge. These programmes include L2 immersion, L1/L2 bilingual [e.g., 50/50], and Content and Language Integrated Learning [CLIL].
- L2 outcomes are not perfect by any means [classroom variety of the language often develops] but students are in a position to use the language productively and continue to refine their knowledge of it if they choose.
- John Macnamara's (1966) study of *Bilingualism in Primary Education* demonstrated that within his national sample, English-L1 students taught mainly through Irish performed at the same level as English-L1 students instructed through English (with Irish taught as a subject).

If We Knew Then What We Know Now...

- L2 immersion and bilingual education *can* contribute very significantly to revitalization of threatened languages.

- **Basque Autonomous Community (Cenoz, 2008)**
 - Steady increase in Basque proficiency (over 16-year olds) from 24.1% in 1991 to 30.1% in 2006;

 - >90% of primary students are now in bilingual (30%) or full Basque-medium (60%) programmes. Less than 9% are in Spanish-medium programmes with Basque taught as a subject; at the secondary level, more than 80% of students are in bilingual or Basque-medium programmes;

 - Evaluations have consistently shown over the past 20 years that students in Basque-medium (Model D) schools are more proficient in Basque than students in bilingual (Model B) schools who, in turn, are more proficient than students in Spanish-medium (Model A) schools; Minimal, if any differences exist in Spanish between the three models.

Looking to the Future...

- O'Doherty: "the value, like the life, of a language depends exclusively on the use made of it". (1958b, p. 264)

The learning of a language (and academic success generally) requires identity investment. Yet this variable is typically omitted from both language planning and curriculum development. The question we must ask is: *How can we teach languages in such a way that students are encouraged and enabled to invest their identities in learning the language?*

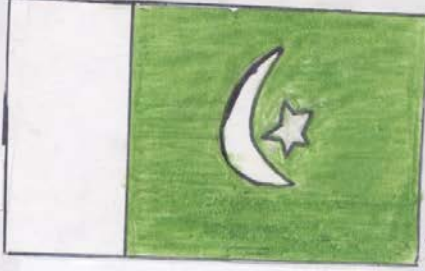
- This question is relevant not only to the teaching of Irish (either in Irish-medium or English-medium schools) but also to teaching other European languages and teaching English as a additional language (EAL) to newcomers.
 - If knowledge of and use of Irish extend and affirm students' identities, they will expend effort in acquiring the language.
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good bye...

Translated in
English
and Urdu

نیا ملک

THE NEW COUNTRY



...Hello!!



About The Authors

We are three best friends. Our names are Madiha Bajwa, Kanta Khalid, and Sulmana Hanif. We are in grade 7 at Michael Cranny E.S. in Maple, Ontario. This story we wrote mostly describes how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country.

ہم تین بہت اچھی دوست ہیں۔ ہمارا نام ہے مادیہ باجوہ، کانتہ خالد،

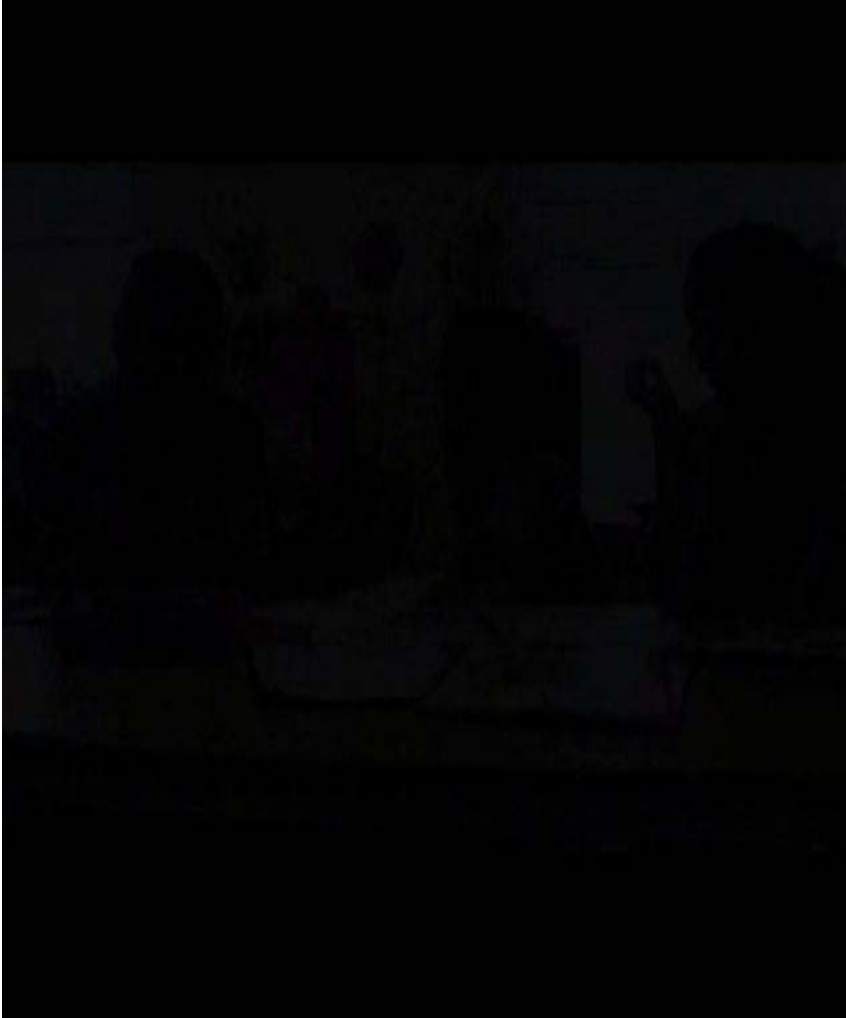
اور سلمانہ حنیف۔ ہم ساتویں کلاس میں پڑتے ہیں اور ہم مائیکل

کریٹیو ایلیمنٹری اسکول میں پڑتے ہیں۔ ہم جیپل اوٹیرمو جو

کینیڈا میں ہے۔ یہ ایک کھلی ہے جس میں بنایا جاتا ہے ایک

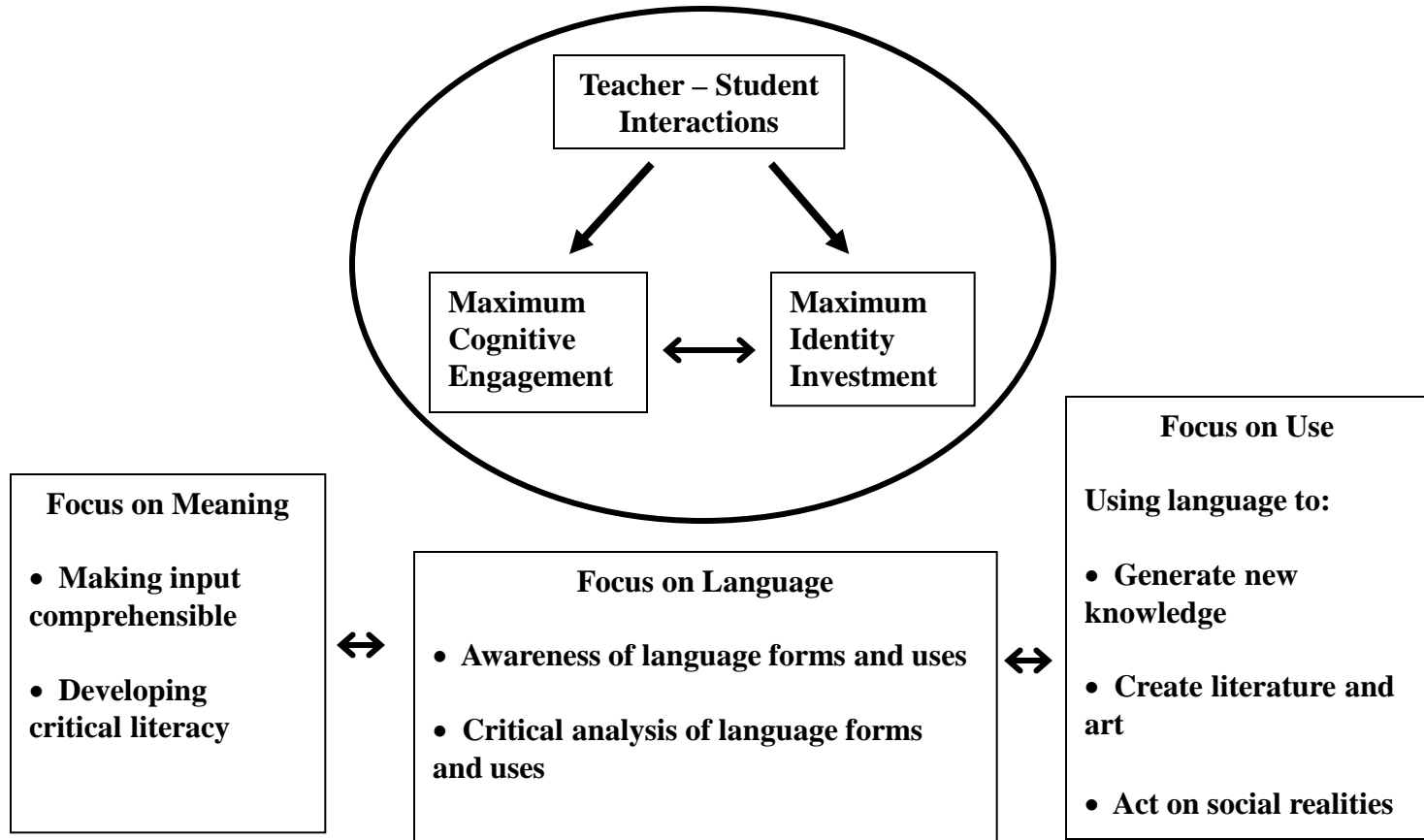
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Kanta's Perspective



- And how it helped me was when I came here in grade 4 the teachers didn't know what I was capable of.
- I was given a pack of crayons and a coloring book and told to get on coloring with it. And after I felt so bad about that--I'm capable of doing much more than just that. I have my own inner skills to show the world than just coloring and I felt that those skills of mine are important also. So when we started writing the book [*The New Country*], I could actually show the world that I am something instead of just coloring.
- And that's how it helped me and it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something, and here today [at the Ontario TESL conference] I *am* actually doing something. I'm not just a coloring person—I can show you that I am something.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC EXPERTISE



Concluding Thoughts

- When we inject an “identity planning” perspective into language policy discussions, with policy understood as operating at state, school, and classroom levels in a variety of language learning contexts, we will ask a different set of questions from those we currently ask in planning language teaching.
- These questions will include the following:
 - In addition to focusing on how to teach the code effectively, how can we organise the curriculum so that students are enabled to engage in powerful uses of language at an early stage of their learning?
 - Does “*translanguaging*” (teaching for transfer across languages) have a role to play in enabling students to do identity-affirming and powerful things with the language?
 - How can we mobilise communities to embrace plurilingualism where knowledge of English and Irish is a natural stepping stone to learning additional languages? So rather than the fractious debate about whether Irish is “being pushed down our throats”, how can we communicate the emerging research findings that bilingualism facilitates the learning of additional languages?