



Raising confidence, building community

**Findings of the focus groups on encouraging
fluency in Irish and its use amongst Irish speakers
and learners**

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**Research Report
Janet Muller
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POBAL,
13-3ú hurlár
Muileann Abhainn Bheara
81 Bóthar Chluanaí
Béal Feirste,
BT12 7AE
Teil: +44 (0)77 13 630325 - R-phost: eolas@pobal.org - www.pobal.org

Why this research?

In 2017-8, POBAL carried out research into the Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment Experience of past pupils of Irish Medium Education in Belfast from the 1970s to the present. This was valuable research and it encouraged us to undertake further study into various aspects of the issue. The first piece of research showed the development of Irish Medium Education (IME) in the city in general, on top of the growth in the numbers of children attending Irish Medium schools. There was no doubt at all that there was a clear demand for educational continuity at post primary level, since so many people choose Irish Medium secondary education. The research found that the young people coming through IME area skills resource, a resource for the labour market at present and for the future, and that they are a lively group that adds to the diversity of the city. Therefore, the research identified the opportunities for Belfast City Council and other government bodies which have duties in relation to economic development, good relations and community planning, to develop and improve services that include the Irish speaking community throughout the city. The research was carried out with funding from Belfast City Council under its Capacity Building programme, and provided a valuable information resource for educationalists, government bodies, Irish language groups, training providers and others. It could help to build capacity and strengthen ongoing work, including opportunities for forward planning, building the local labour market and matching capacity with employment opportunities.

As we looked back 45 years, to the founding of the first IM primary school in Belfast, we recognised that the status of the language and of Irish Medium education has changed in positive ways. A sense of ability and confidence emerged from much of the response to the research. Nonetheless there was also an awareness of marginalisation and exclusion from the mainstream. The research highlighted the concern of respondents at the lack of legislative protection for Irish and the paucity of Irish language services and visibility in their localities. Respondents were overwhelming in their call for more services and more support for Irish speakers and for the 'normalisation' of the public use of the language through legislation, increased visibility and new and improved services.

The findings of the research were extremely positive in terms of use of Irish in both the work and personal lives of respondents. But, still, there were references made to 'a lack of confidence' and the need for additional learning and practice opportunities, for example, conversation circles, recognition through awards, for instance 'Irish speaker of the Month', social events for learners or those who wanted to learn. Several people mentioned problems with confidence and ability and the need for support on a continuing basis for fluency and accuracy in Irish, as well as the need for computer software and resources that would be useful for administrative tasks.

When we were discussing the findings of the research with a wide range of educationalists, Irish language groups, employers and with the community in general, there was a warm welcome for the positive findings of the research. We quickly realised, even though the strengths of IME were fully recognised, that some of the key players also realised that there was a need for continuous improvement in all aspects of the story. A small but significant number of people said they understood that an important percentage of young people and older learners lacked confidence in their Irish, and that there was a danger they would turn away from the language because of this.

Therefore, to build on the baseline data already collected, and once more with funding from Belfast City Council under its Capacity Building programme, POBAL decided to investigate more deeply the issue of self-confidence, through a series of focus groups geared towards case studies of the opinions and recommendations of educationalists, past pupils and employers.

Terms of Reference

The research which POBAL carried out in 2017-8 was focussed on baseline information gathering about past pupils of IME in Belfast. With the IME system in place in the city for 45 years, we received responses from people between 18-50 years of age. We recognised therefore that the issue of confidence raising is not one that concerns young people only. It also relates to adult learners and those who have left school with good Irish, perhaps some time ago, and did not have opportunities to use it to the extent they would have liked, for various reasons.

Consequently, we met with those who had varied experience – educationalists, academics, representatives of government departments and Irish language groups, in order to determine what type of questions we should put and to whom. We decided on a small number of focus groups and pulled together a contact list. At the beginning, we tried to group people together according to their expertise – for example, educationalists, lifelong learning teachers, academics, Irish language development officers etc. We soon learned however that it would be difficult to get certain people together at one time, and we decided to call extra meetings. In addition, in a small number of cases, where we could not arrange a suitable time, we sent out a questionnaire so that we could still draw on their experience and opinions. We decided not to distribute the questionnaire widely, however, because we wished to keep a sharp focus on interaction in small-group formats.

Research Methodology

From the earliest stages, POBAL recognised the importance of attracting the appropriate participants to the research. Prior to drafting the questions for the focus groups, we held a series of discussions with educationalists, schools, representatives of key organisations and committees to identify specific areas of research interest and to assist us in devising the most appropriate format for the focus groups.

Among the matters of interest raised in these discussions was the definition of what constitutes ‘confidence’ and how it can be measured. It was widely agreed that there are a wide range of kinds of ‘confidence’ or ‘lack of confidence’, and as well, that often it is not a fixed state, or even a long-lasting one. Most people lose confidence at times, or feel that they are out of their depth when they undertake a difficult task under the eye of someone more skilled. The opinion was also expressed that sometimes in life ‘lack of confidence’ can be used as an acceptable way of refusing to take a step forward.

According to one senior lecturer in St Mary’s University College, confidence relates to the knowledge which speakers and learners of Irish can acquire, and to opportunities to put it into practice. Clearly also, the individual must be willing to draw on the knowledge and opportunities to practice.

We settled on ten questions for all the focus groups, regardless of the area of expertise of the participants. In the first place, instead of assuming that every group would have the same opinion as those expressed by respondents in our previous research, we attempted to find out if the participants would identify groups of individuals who demonstrate a lack of confidence in their Irish, and who might be at risk of turning from the language. We then asked why, in the participants view, these specific groups lacked confidence. We also felt it important to inquire as to whether lack of confidence relates to particular aspects of the language (for example, to the spoken or written language, to vocabulary, social versus academic language, grammar etc.)

We then turned to the actions which could be taken to build confidence. We asked if there were samples of good practice which helped with raising confidence, and were other actions needed as well. We asked who should undertake the actions in question and what resources would be needed and where should they come from. The participants were asked, in their opinion, what level of importance did the issue of confidence raising have, and finally at the end of each session, there was a chance to raise other points and make recommendations.

The focus groups were organised during the day, in various venues in West Belfast. With POBAL's Director as facilitator, the research questions were put in the same order to each focus group and points made during the discussion written up on a flip chart. The interconnectedness of the research questions soon became apparent, with participants often offering solutions even as they identified problems. We have chosen to reflect this in this report since it indicates the organic nature of the discussion taking place.

We organised two meetings with educationalists, teachers and school principals, academics and representatives of organisations with an adult learning remit. We had other focus groups with participants from further education, the youth sector, Irish language development officers and employers from the arts and Irish language community sector, and from the media. Overall, more than 40 people with specific expertise took part in the focus groups. Among them were representatives from: An Cumann Chluain Árd, Coláiste Feirste, Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain, Ollscoil na Ríona, Scoil na Fuisioige, Gaelchúrsaí / Acadamh na Gaeilge, Comhairle na

Gaelscolaíochta, An tÁisaonad, Coláiste na hOllscoile Naomh Muire, An Droichead, Aisling Ghéar, Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Glór na Móna, Ionad Uíbh Eachach, Raidió Fáilte, Macha Media, An Ciste Craoltóireachta Gaeilge and Below the Radar.

Research Questions

In the participants own experience, are there groups of individuals who show a lack of confidence in their Irish language competence and who are therefore in danger of turning away from the language?

We asked those present at each focus group did they themselves think that there were particular groups at risk of turning from the language due to lack of confidence. Each group recognised that this was an important major question, and almost everyone mentioned anecdotal samples from their own experience. It was clear that the participants recognised that this was also a complex question, and that the individual's personality played a significant influence on the choices they make when they lack confidence. They felt that the language you use is a personal choice, and there is no one simple answer. At the same time, participants from the community sector, as well as employers, referred to the fact that outside of the Irish language sector, little is made of people having Irish, and this lack of validation contributes to a lack of confidence. According to one participant however, people are not always honest when they say why they do not use the Irish that they have. Using English is easier for many, especially if they have been away from the language for some time. Other participants made the point that English is all around us all the time and that it is no wonder if the power of the language influences Irish language usage.

As to those working in the education sector (at any level, from primary school to third level education), they all recognised that there were strengths and weaknesses in relation to language acquisition at every level and in every education system. It was noted that a certain percentage of the specific challenges for Irish Medium schools would be the same in any other school. Several teachers mentioned, for example the way in which the mindset of a school pupil changes according to age. Some thought that there is a period, around 13-14 years, when many children reject the authority of the school. In the case of IME, at times, 'authority' appears the same as the language used in school, and this period can damage the attitude of a young person towards the language. In general, the participants believed that there was need to

publicise more the health, educational and employment benefits of Irish. As well, the participants in all the focus groups recognised that there was a specific importance to events and activities outside school, not just as a backup to immersion IME, but to help understanding that Irish is not a language of school alone. Some of the participants from the community sector said that adults recognise more often the value of the Irish language, because they have to make a positive choice to learn it. At times, according to many, school pupils do not recognise that they have an additional skill, especially when they do not see that this is an accepted fact in life outside school. An employer told us that a significant number of young people when applying for jobs with his organisation, think that there is more value to a particular NVQ qualification than there is to their fluency in Irish – even though the jobs in question are in an Irish language organisation. The employer suggested that perhaps they take their language skills for granted, but at the same time, he noted that they appear surprised to learn that they can really get jobs in an Irish speaking environment, even though there has been such noticeable growth in the Irish speaking community in recent years.

A time was also identified when school pupils who feel at ease with the Irish language realise that perhaps they do not know everything. The level of self confidence which IME pupils demonstrate is often referred to, but some of those who are used to hearing Irish around them can lose confidence when they appreciate suddenly at an early age that they may not have completely perfect Irish (probably in exactly the same way that they do not have perfect English or Maths). There was much recognition of this particular problem, and we were told that the same sentiment can be seen in adults also. As to adult learners, the participants thought that it can also be difficult for them to find opportunities to speak the language and that therefore they do not get practice in using the language. When people do not have the chance to use the language regularly, in a wide range of circumstances, they may often think that they do not have sufficient fluency to maintain a conversation with someone else. It was also recognised that people are afraid to make mistakes, or to be unable to understand another person. All the participants agreed that there was a need to keep sending the message that learning is a continuous process. The participants referred again and again to the importance of praising and inspiring people, but they recognised too that teachers and those with

fluency must correct mistakes. Several people suggested that praise should be given first and then if necessary, the correction. Others felt that it might be better to repeat the sense of the phrase, but correctly or in a richer way, and then to continue the conversation without drawing attention to the correction.

All the participants at the meetings thought that there was a particular challenge for people when there are gaps in their day-to-day contact with the language. For example, in places where there is no post primary IME available, it can be difficult for young people to raise their self-confidence once more when they have been in an an-English environment for a year or so. Some of the participants pointed out that there is a particular challenge for those who attended IME but whose parents did not have Irish and who do not work in the Irish language sector, because they have fewer opportunities to speak the language on a regular basis. The participants in all the focus groups felt strongly that there are significant gaps in Irish language provision at present, and that this gives rise to particular challenges. They emphasised the need for continuity, variety and high quality teaching in IME, as well as for resources and opportunities in the local area to speak Irish. They identified the same problem with young people leaving school at 17-18 years if they are not able to access work or undertake training through Irish. According to the participants, it is extremely difficult for people to return to the language when there is a break in continuity.

Another group was identified who could be said to be at linguistic disadvantage. This was young Irish speaking parents. Life changes completely when parents (and particularly young women) are at home with a baby, and the participants felt that more research should be done to find out what percentage of these people are raising children with Irish at home and what support they needed.

Anecdotally, many of the participants spoke of former IME pupils returning to IM schools to register their own children, but who had not brought up the same children with Irish, and who are not now happy to speak Irish to teachers. The point was made that it is a parental choice to return to IME, and that this shows that these parents recognise the advantages of their own children having Irish. It was recommended that more research be undertaken into what level of Irish these parents had when they were at school, so that a 'tipping point' might be identified

when their attitude towards Irish was about to change, and the kind of support needed to raise their self confidence be made available. Reference was made to the need for immersion education for these adults and more chances to speak Irish, as well as specific terminology or richness of language as it pertains to raising children.

It was clear that the participants understood how challenging it is to promote at all times a positive, confident attitude, especially when the language is still marginalised in this society. They recommended that everyone should be influenced positively in relation to the language, and not simply those who speak it. It was clear though that they understood that there is a balance to be achieved between meeting the needs of the Irish speaking community and influencing the broader community. Because of the lack of financial and human resources, Irish language groups have to direct their energy carefully. Some of the participants found fault with Foras na Gaeilge's approach in relation to the attitudes of the English speaking community, since they felt that it was not clear that Foras had a strategy to improve the image of the language, in spite of this being part of its role. The participants felt that each generation needed 'champions', an authoritative person in the immediate company or circle, to promote a positive attitude towards Irish.

Those from the education sector were conscious that there were gaps in the system that IME alone could not correct. It was recognised that in both the IME and English Medium Education (EME) sectors there was particular terminology and way of speaking in use, and that this language does not always reflect life outside of school. In the case of Irish, unless the language is spoken at home, it is possible that pupils will have gaps in vocabulary and terminology.

It appears that gaps in provision have a detrimental influence at every educational level. Several of the participants from Third Level education referred to the way that people lose contact with Irish language life at times when they are in a job not in the Irish language sector. They said that there are not enough jobs with Irish and that if the services that are needed by the community were to be provided, that there would be far more jobs and a greater variety in the type of employment.

Some of the participants drew a distinction between the circumstances of the language in urban and rural areas. In the first place, very often there is no continuity in educational provision after primary school, especially in rural areas but according

to some people, in the rural community there is much more mutual reliance than in the city. At times, they stated there would be different nuances in the relationship between the community and the church and between the community and the GAA in rural areas, for example, and this could have a not insignificant influence on both rural education and social life. On top of these differences, often the support infrastructure and opportunities to speak or be in contact with the language may not be as developed in some rural areas as in some urban areas. It was accepted that this situation is improving now with more youth and after-schools clubs setting up. It was felt however that children may feel more isolated and separated from Irish speaking company outside of the school, depending on where they live. One participant said that the Irish speaking community was like a 'hidden' community. Another person however said that there did not seem to be much difference in the standard of Irish amongst pupils from schools in rural and urban areas. He felt it might relate more to the ethos and teaching within schools than with their location.

Everyone agreed that there was a need for signage and for attempts to promote the use of Irish in public life. They said that if you did not already know that a staff member in a cafe or a shop spoke Irish, you might assume they did not and therefore lose the chance to speak the language. Participants also felt that there was not enough information widely available about what the Irish language groups offer and what kind of support can be found through events, classes and other services. They thought that the steps that can be taken to acquire or refresh language competence should be advertised much more clearly.

Everyone at the focus groups recognised the importance of Irish being taught in English Medium schools. They mentioned the high standards of Irish that some pupils in EM schools achieve, especially in the written language. They stated however that it is obvious that children in IME have better opportunities to attain greater mastery in the language, and that they were very often more comfortable speaking the language than children in the EM system, where Irish is taught as one of a number of school subjects. It was recognised that fluency is achieved in the EM system, and that at times there is more emphasis on grammar and the written language in EM schools, but fewer chances for a pupil to speak. Outside of the classroom, in EM schools, Irish is not the usual medium of communication with teachers or with other pupils. This results in pupils in the EM system not having such

natural spoken Irish, though the point was made that it is possible to build self-confidence gradually once they do have regular opportunities to speak Irish. Concern was expressed in the fall in recent years in the numbers of pupils in EM schools who are selecting GCSE Irish due to the failure to include languages as STEM subjects. This means that provision and resources are needed in EM schools, as well as a change in the status of languages within the system.

In your own opinion, why do certain groups lack confidence?

It was agreed that there was no single definition of 'confidence' and that therefore it was not possible to identify one simple reason either. Those at the focus groups felt that we all experience lack of confidence at times, depending on circumstances. Participants referred to the complexity of the question as well, since 'confidence' relates to ability, the image of the language, the linguistic environment, the lack of status for Irish and the individual's own attitude. Reference was made to bad experience; the benefit there would be in promoting and strengthening the vision of IME; the attitude of peer groups; bullying at school; weak management in the sector and the burden of work as well. Participants felt that an Irish language ethos should be promoted more systematically in Irish language organisations, but that this can be difficult at times since English is everywhere and extremely powerful. The promotion and encouragement of pride amongst Irish speakers is crucial. A further point emerged throughout the whole discussion, that developing language skills is a long process, and that the methodology is not always perfect. For example, the difficulty of learning a language if someone just attends one evening class a week was mentioned. In addition, the importance of the ethos within IM schools and the learning atmosphere in EM schools and in higher and further education institutions was raised. The participants felt that these elements can have a powerful influence on the individual and it is worthwhile working towards continuously improving ethos and atmosphere.

At the same time, participants identified some easily recognisable aspects to the issue. For example, the location where a conversation takes place, and the power relationship between people. One person stated that it is not the same speaking Irish in the bank when you want to draw out £5 from your own account and speaking Irish when you are looking for a £10,000 loan, because the customer might feel

concerned that the bank would refuse the loan if they did not approve the language choice.

Nonetheless, during the debate at the meetings, a number of common factors were identified which affect the individual:

- When there is no continuity in IME from one level to another, and especially for children who do not have the chance to avail of post-primary education through Irish
- Parents who do not have fluent Irish
- A lack of higher and further education, training and vocational training through Irish
- Weakness in the spoken language
- Weakness in the written language
- 'Social language' is needed, but there is a lack of time in schools and in classes for adults to teach a broader vocabulary because of the need to focus on a particular subject and the language of exams
- Some people are nervous with speakers who are more fluent than themselves (or who they believe to be more fluent) and they fear making mistakes
- That there are insufficient opportunities for people to use the language on a regular basis
- That they do not have appropriate opportunities; for instance, to improve the accuracy or richness of their spoken Irish, or regular practice of their spoken Irish, or access to new types of terminology needed for changing lifestyle circumstances
- In relation to adults, because of lack of opportunity, perhaps they often see the language as one of the classroom only
- A lack of continuity between different levels from beginners through more advanced classes, and more co-ordination is needed between providers of classes as well as more publicity
- Unrealistic expectations regarding the amount of investment that it takes for an adult to learn a language – learning a language can certainly be achieved but the speed of doing so will depend on the amount of time one can give to it
- Lack of language planning – is there enough support for parents?

Does a lack of confidence relate to a given aspect of the language (spoken or written language, vocabulary, social language (including language of play), academic language, grammar, other)

Those attending every focus group felt that ‘fluency’ includes every aspect of language mentioned in the question, and that therefore each one of them can affect a person’s confidence. That said, it was recognised that everyone (almost) makes grammar mistakes, in the same way as they do in English, usually without realising it. It was claimed that most people are nervous when speaking or writing a language publicly in certain circumstances, for example when in the company of lecturers, native speakers and so on. Depending on the personality of the individual, uncertainty about a subtle point of grammar could undermine their confidence or they may simply carry on speaking and writing and learning into the future. In one focus group, there was a reference made to people who are fluent in Irish but who do not use the spoken or written language, and again, this depends on the mindset, attitude and personality of the individual.

The point was made that with whom you speak Irish is crucial. If Irish is the language of the workplace, the school, the family and so on, you will speak Irish, and the opposite is also true. It was accepted again and again that generally speaking, spoken Irish is to the fore in IME, and that children and adult learners have an advantage within a fully Irish speaking environment. At the same time it was recognised that not every Irish language business or every ‘IM’ school offers the same level, or perhaps the same standard of full Irish language environment. Written language policies are helpful as are direction and leadership, to ensure that Irish is used as the means of communication every day.

As noted, it was said during the focus groups that pupils in EM education often have a high level of fluency in the written language, as well as a clear grasp of grammar. They do not however have the same ability in the spoken language, due to lack of continuing opportunities to use the spoken language. There were varying opinions on the different types of teaching methods – is it better to promote ability through teaching grammar, or through natural conversation, based on the sounds and pronunciation of the language, and on dialects that are now more recognised in the Irish Language Standard. It was agreed however that pupils in EME can achieve

spoken fluency when they are able to spend time in an Irish language environment. Although the differences in teaching methods in EM and IM schools were recognised, it was said that problems with written Irish were very common amongst both adult learners and school children. In the case of adults especially, it was said that many prefer to resort to English, or not to attempt to achieve a high standard in the written language.

A number of participants thought that gaps in vocabulary was a problem, and they linked this issue at times to the kind of limited language that is used in school and academic life. There is a need to teach the language of emotions and of family intimacy. Because of this, they emphasised the role of parents and often of mothers, as the first and often main carer. It was accepted there more research is needed to devise suitable support packages for parents, depending on their own fluency. Many said they felt there were gaps in terminology and a lack of specific vocabulary amongst both learners and school children alike. However, this depends on the strength of the different sectors. The point was made, for example, that terminology has been developed and is in use every day in the Irish language media, because the communications sector has been providing radio and television programmes for many years through RTÉ, Raidió na Gaeltachta etc. If there were a wide range of subjects available through vocational education, people would be familiar with deeper and wider terminology. Nevertheless, people are reading less in general, no matter what language the reading material is in, and this impacts on the learning of and contact with the Irish language. Americanised English has a great influence on us also, and it is difficult to avoid this.

A question was raised as to how relevant the Irish language curriculum is for learners, since it focuses on 'levels' and is based often on the curriculum for foreign languages, which does not chime with people who want to learn Irish. In the case of social media, the Irish speaking community has had to invent a brand new language, often based on English. With social media so central now in the lives of young people, emphasis was placed on this gap, but at the same time, some of the participants recognised that there is a creative spirit behind some of the invention.

Finally, although the participants identified a number of problems, they also felt that there is growth and development in Irish language life and that the numbers of

people who speak Irish is expanding. There are challenges ahead, but they were hopeful about the future.

How can we undertake confidence raising?

It was clear from the participants' responses that this relates to the circumstances of the individual and their personality as well. The point was made that, as the number of people who have Irish and those who have high levels of fluency grows, so the confidence of people in general will also grow. All of the participants without exception referred to the lack of status of the Irish language, of the lack of appropriate services for the Irish speaking community and the lack of visibility. It was agreed that a more welcoming context should be created and that the use of Irish in public life should be normalised.

One of the participants said that a 'community' is necessary to raise a child with Irish and with self confidence. All of the focus groups recognised the crucial importance of the Irish language groups and the huge influence they play on the development of an Irish speaking community outside the education system. But a great number of concerns were raised about the independence/ dependence of the sector. According to some participants, Irish language groups and projects are carrying out high quality work on a shoestring even as the control of funders, and/or politicians increases all the time. Participants felt strongly that the independence of the sector should be protected, as they recognised that there could be serious implications for them if funders or politicians were unhappy with criticism, regardless of whether it was positive or negative criticism.

A large number of participants were strongly of the opinion that more jobs are needed so that people would have a proper choice when they were finishing their education through Irish. If the 'Irish language sector' were itself stronger, there would be more opportunities for people to use their Irish every day. As to adult learners, if there were more opportunities for voluntary work, this could be of help to them. It would be useful if there were co-ordination between Irish language groups and those who were seeking the chance to practice the language, so that those with appropriate skills could be put in touch with groups looking for help and who were able to provide a training package and experience in return.

The point was made several times that language policies and leadership are needed to promote an all-Irish speaking environment in the work place, especially perhaps when a relatively large number of young people are working together. Clear direction needs to be given to ensure that, in spite of any negative social pressures, that it is Irish that is the common language of communication not just with customers but among all the staff as well.

Some of those taking part emphasised the importance of a wide range of social activities in local venues, directed at specific age groups. It was accepted that social language is developed through being part of a community which speaks Irish. It was proposed that 'Open Days' could be organised by Irish language centres throughout the city (and further afield) to provide more information to the local community in general, or even a major event such as an Irish language 'Culture Night' could be organised.

In relation to adult learners, there should be continuity between class levels and the curriculum should be more appropriate to peoples' lives. People should be given the chance to learn specific vocabulary, for example new parents. Usually in evening classes, it is the language of academia and grammar that is developed and at times it can be difficult for some people to attend formal classes. Flexibility regarding times and venues would be needed, and participants felt that informal learning events are needed.

Many of those taking part felt that there is not enough understanding of the advantages of Irish language acquisition and bilingualism in general and that more publicity should be available on this. Participants thought that the Irish speaking community is usually very welcoming and understanding when speaking to learners. At the same time, they recognised that a stronger message could be put out, that using Irish was the most important thing, especially at the beginning, and that it is worth speaking it without being too worried about mistakes. In order to raise awareness about the importance of Irish, it would be worth promoting Irish language 'champions' or ambassadors and finding new ways to show that Irish is lively and 'cool'.

Those taking part stated that people must be able to get Irish language employment, in a wide range of careers. It is clear that every kind of services are needed and that

the numbers of Irish speakers able to provide those services is growing but that the state has not grasped the opportunities to recruit Irish speakers. There should be strenuous attempts to ensure that receptionists, secretaries and front line staff should have Irish. Those present agreed that signage was of particular importance as was the welcoming of the use of Irish. Some signage can be obtained for free from Foras na Gaeilge and other sources but the question was raised as to whether there is enough publicity about this.

There was a comprehensive discussion at the focus groups about the best ways to raise confidence through the education system. It was accepted that it can be difficult to choose the perfect approach in every case. Not every teacher has the same viewpoint and it was recognised that teaching can be seen as a job rather than a calling. It would be helpful if there were better understanding as to the role of governors and trustees. At times, these are people who have experience in English Medium schools, and sometimes they may not speak Irish. Some of the participants said that it must be recognised that development is needed from the sector and the community on the 'vision' and philosophy of IME. In addition, it was recognised that there are weaknesses in the infrastructure of the sector, as well as gaps in provision; that there is a lack of teachers and a large workload. At present, there is variety in the ethos of schools – Catholic schools, full immersion Irish schools, bilingual schools and so on. There was discussion about how difficult it is to identify a single ethos, but once that was done, it was recommended that the ethos was part of a written policy within the school's development plan. This would mean the sector was defined more clearly and it would be easier for teachers to operate effectively within an agreed structure. At the same time, it was recognised that the sector is new and that significant changes could come with a new generation.

It was recognised that it was crucial to praise pupils as well as correcting them, so that there was 'positive correction'. A distinction was made however between 'praise' and 'flattery'. Knowledge has to be imparted and the steps towards independent learning laid out clearly. It was accepted also that it was necessary to give responsibility to the individual along with the tools for improvement.

A number of people referred to new technology and Apps as learning tools, and in general, it was accepted that there was growth in the use of the language on social

media. In addition, some thought that songs, storytelling and the culture of the language were useful as teaching methods and that variety was necessary in the classroom to keep interest alive.

Some participants referenced the need for continuous learning and for classes in accuracy and richness in the workplace for those who were fluent in the language (including teachers), as well as specialist classes for people entering a new job or otherwise experiencing another lifestyle change, new parents etc. There was agreement that certificates have value, as do 'stars' and qualifications as recognition of an individual's progress. It was recommended that classes and events for parents should be offered during the day. In addition, immersion services and a wide range of events should be available in various areas of the city – cookery courses, photography, technology, music and art etc through the medium of Irish. In relation to the cost of courses and classes, participants recognised that there was a contradiction between seeking a realistic fee from people who do not always have ready income to spend, and selling the product under its worth. The latter being something in itself that can, at times, have a detrimental impact on the individual's point of view.

Are there any examples of good practice which help in these cases?

We asked the participants if they knew of any examples of good practice. Interestingly, 'Wales' was one simple reply of good practice as there is widespread knowledge in the country of the Welsh language. 'Late full immersion' was also mentioned as a scheme which allows pupils from English medium schools to spend four months in an immersion scheme during which everyday use of language is practised through cooking and other activities.

Also people mentioned some of the building blocks to the growth of the Irish language over the last few years, such as immersion education, the campaign for the Irish Language Act in the six counties, the setting up of youth clubs and the development of Apps etc. As to the best approaches, the following were mentioned: work grounded in community development values, learning work in small groups in

which everybody has a specific role, and proof reading and editing of written work for publication.

As well as this, specific projects were mentioned: past students as language heroes and champions, 'peer education' schemes and workshops on language accuracy and richness which were organised by the BBC for broadcasters, the great work done by the various Irish language groups in organising events and classes, especially Cumann Cluain Árd, the rap group 'Kneecap', TG Lorgan, Laochra Loch Lao doing sport through Irish, the arts and literary company An tSnáthaid Mor and the jobs fair for the pupils of Coláiste Feirste as well as a wide range of events organised for the language community.

Are other actions needed? What are they and how important is it that these actions are taken?

When the participants were asked how useful it would be to organise activities to support people who were in danger of giving up using the language, we were told that this should be at the top of the list of priorities for the Irish speaking community. As one person explained, we are focused on teaching the language and 'giving' it to people but what's the point if they don't use it because of a lack of confidence.

At every focus group meeting, it was mentioned that there was a need to change the status of the language, to de-politicise and normalise it and to increase the visibility of the language through a strong, comprehensive strong language act. As one participant said, 'When the language is heard, it is spoken', and there was a widespread belief that every aspect of the language would improve as the community grew.

The pride of the participants in the achievements of the Irish language community over the last few years was evident. It was recognised that there are gaps in the provision of activities for Irish speakers and weaknesses in the approaches but there is a realisation that there would be nothing for the Irish speaking community were it not for the amazing work done by the community itself. Many felt that the Irish language community has to take on duties for which it is not responsible and for which it is not resourced. The Irish speaking community has created a completely Irish speaking environment and Irish language 'sanctuaries'. While this is a great

achievement, people said that it must be acknowledged that it is undoubtedly a huge drawback for a small community to have to bear such onerous responsibilities when it does not have sufficient power to change the circumstances of the language from top to bottom overnight. There was also recognition at the focus groups that the community is under pressure to act as if it itself had all the necessary experience and every level of expertise to enable it to fulfil these duties, even when it was clear that this is not the case.

Having said that, reference was made to the need for 'vision' and 'inspiration' to keep the work going and to derive the greatest benefit from it. The other side of the story, and a cause of anger, unsurprisingly, is that Irish speakers cannot more often rely on realistic support from the state, from bodies which are supposed to be able and effective. Many thought that a language framework in public life would be a great help in promoting the work of the community.

There was a lot of discussion at the focus groups about night classes and intensive courses, conversation circles and the wide range of events organised by small grassroots groups. Even so, people thought that there should be more events, at every street corner and there should be events focused on different age groups and interest groups, such as families and parents. Also there should be more coordination between groups so that there is clear information for learners and young people in English medium schools how to access opportunities for practising the language. Of course, in order to achieve this, organisations would need more funding and a number of participants raised the specific difficulties in Irish language arts and drama because of a lack of money. It was understood that value for money must be to the fore but the point was made that high quality cultural events cannot be organised on a shoestring. It is clear that a drama requiring six actors and a team of stage managers and technicians cannot be staged on a tiny, unrealistic grant. Where this is the case, the lack of funding has a detrimental effect on the fundamental nature of the dramas that can be performed, something which in itself impacts on audiences, on work with schools and with Irish language groups, on writers and actors etc. On top of that, a lack of marketing budget etc could add to stereotypes about the standard and importance of the Irish language arts in the broader community.

Mention was also made in the focus groups about the neglect that is often apparent in the wider community of the importance of research and expertise in relation to bilingualism. The participants felt that sometimes funders and politicians didn't fully appreciate research or the expertise that Irish language groups have acquired over a long period of time. All the focus groups emphasised the importance of showing respect for worthwhile research and expertise, especially as linguistics is a relatively new discipline. A budget would be needed to make a priority of the research work that is currently essential. It is acknowledged that lessons can be learned from other countries but participants said that there are unique aspects of the language revival here and that it is necessary to do more research on this. Among these research subjects are: linguistic development in an urban setting, the needs of parents who are not native speakers but are bringing up their children with Irish and the challenges for teachers and pupils in Irish Medium Education if Irish is not the home language, training for teachers and support for bilingual children who have special educational needs.

A lot of people saw the need for effective language planning at every level and in every aspect of life. Some of the people were disappointed that sometimes lip service was paid to the idea of language planning instead of promoting the vision of planning. Although there is talk about 'language planning' in a few areas throughout the country, the focus groups felt that there was neither commitment nor a proper understanding behind the scheme. Some thought that there were a wide range of organisations that should have a role to play, including Belfast City Council. Now that they have a newly appointed Irish language officer, a worthwhile language policy should be designed for the whole city in conjunction with language groups. People thought that it should include both those who use the language regularly and those who speak Irish but need a support network to create opportunities to speak through informal activities. They thought it should aim at encouraging growth in every part of the city and beyond in order to put an end to 'ghettoisation'. It was mentioned regularly in the focus groups that it was important that Irish could be spoken everywhere and in all areas of life.

It was mentioned again and again in focus groups that there was need for more jobs using Irish and that encouragement should be given to companies, government departments and other businesses to welcome the use of the language in the

workplace. Among the high achievers in terms of job creation, the increase in childcare schemes was mentioned. It was recognised however that there is a need for more provision to meet demand, and especially in areas where this service does not exist at present.

The participants felt that more could be done to improve the perception of Irish in the wider community and questions were asked as to whether Foras na Gaeilge had a strategy for this. It was mentioned several times that a continuous campaign was needed to show the benefits of the language in relation to health, and that those who are bilingual have 'something extra'. Some said that this was important in the light of hostility towards the language in this society, but that in addition, because it takes a time commitment and energy from those learning the language or using it in the public sphere. Some felt that the viewpoint still existed that Irish was nothing more than 'a pastime' and that this should be disproved through the systematic provision of information to the wider community.

Some participants mentioned the lack of reading material in the language. Books for various age groups were mentioned but also the lack of different types of magazines, specialist ones such as photography, computing, hillwalking and gardening among others. It was pointed out that this would also help with terminology.

The participants felt that the Irish language community has done a lot but there is still much to be done. It was said that it wasn't right for there to be duplication of work and Foras na Gaeilge was criticised for this particularly with regard to a small number of 'Lead Organisations' which are now imitating the work of groups based in the north. It was clear that the participants felt that there was a particular importance to the independence from funders and politicians of Irish language groups and they were proud of the community ownership with they promote and defend. It was evident that the focus groups felt that Irish language organisations would have to defend their independence even though they were aware of the challenges involved.

While those from the education sector were debating these issues, it was natural that the talk turned to aspects of Irish Medium Education and the vision and mission of the sector. Some of them felt that there was an urgent need for more debate and consensus among schools in the sector. It was said that there was a general lack of language planning and among different levels in schools. It was agreed that the role

of the teacher was central in the system as a language champion and that they need constant encouragement as they are the greatest role models

Those taking part were very satisfied with the achievements of the Irish medium education sector since it was founded in Belfast 45 years ago but they also acknowledged that there is a significant number of young people from the schools and the classes who do not use the Irish they have. One said that the Irish speaking community was filling a bottomless bucket and that this could not be achieved without the challenge being set out in the classroom.

Perhaps because of this, many recommendations came out of the focus groups. Among those from the education sector were:

- A plan to ensure that the Irish taught in schools is of the highest possible standard.
- An immersion education programme for Key Stages 2-3 with an emphasis on social language.
- A significant investment (£12 million was suggested) in a training programme and putting teachers and subs into schools with this programme in place.
- A recruitment scheme to encourage good teachers/excellent teachers into the sector.
- Investment in research- for example- the ongoing work on a language framework being undertaken at every level and finished quickly, the views of senior pupils in the sector, coordinating of the facilities available etc.
- Financial assistance to be made available for Irish language groups providing support, for example lecturers/writers/actors coming into schools to raise the standard of the language.
- Technology- formal links with Gaeltacht areas.
- Working with others in the education and training sector (colleges, boards and universities) to develop recognised qualifications and certificates, for example a qualification in development work with the language community in schools etc.

As for English medium schools, it was thought that efforts should be started in STEM subjects so that there would be recognition of the value of languages generally in English medium schools and that work would be undertaken to develop confidence and links between English and Irish medium schools.

Who should undertake these activities?

The focus groups gave a variety of interesting answers to this question. Some thought that the Irish speaking community should take charge of a wide range of things, settle on an agreed vision of where our future lies, develop the Irish Medium Education sector and arrange more activities etc. At the same time it was recognised that there was a need for improvement, that there was a need for expert language planning and for strong language legislation so that all the responsibility no longer falls on the community itself. It was said that it should be top down and bottom up improvement with ideas and vision coming from the community and support from a supportive state. The participants referred to the need for closer working relationships between the community and the state since there would be need for contributions from both.

There was a strong feeling that a state body ought to be directing some of these activities. That said, many felt that it should not be left in the hands of Foras na Gaeilge. On several occasions, there were references to community dissatisfaction at the approach and lack of transparency of Foras na Gaeilge, their lack of strategy and their lack of engagement with the community. Participants said that Foras should have an input but felt that they lacked the ability to see the work through. Some felt that this leaves the community without an effective state organisation and some people felt that that left a huge gap. A significant number said that Foras is not functioning as it should. It is seen as a problem that Foras is the main funder for the Irish language and many felt that it would be an advantage if there were more funding organisations, especially for groups in the six counties, where there is no Irish language legislation and the state cannot be relied on to fulfil its obligations. But it was mentioned that Foras gets a percentage of its grant from the twenty six counties and a smaller percentage from the six counties. It was said that this grant was not being shared out as it should and that there is a partitionist mind set in some of the decisions made by Foras.

Some participants stated that funding was being wasted by ‘Lead Organisations’¹ some of which were duplicating work that was already in hand by other groups. The question was raised if Foras and the Lead organisations gave enough consideration to the six counties. One person stated that Foras had only £ 1,000,000 for its community development scheme and that with twenty six groups throughout the country looking for funding, Foras has adopted the regular practice of ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’. As for input from the community and working with them, many felt that Foras’s processes were no more than a ‘tick box exercise’ and that they had no strategy for Irish Medium Education or for raising awareness, or for providing more information about the Irish language among English speakers. It was felt that Foras and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta should prioritise raising awareness and respect for the language. Again and again, however, there was frustration that in principle the likes of Foras, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and CCEA were seen as having specific roles but the implementation of them could be improved upon.

People felt that the universities and third level colleges had a role to play along with Irish and English medium schools, the G.A.A. and the media.

As for the state’s obligations, participants felt that there was a role to play for government departments and for statutory organisations. One participant felt strongly that there was no role for politicians. This person felt that the language should be neutral and non-political.

What are the resources which are needed to put these actions into effect?

There were various suggestions for this, depending on the circumstances of which the participants had experience. Some of them said that there was great need for funding, and that there should be various funding streams available. It is obvious that the participants felt that funders often failed to appreciate the added value of Irish language work and that often the applicant has to make little of this when describing the project and the vision of the organisation. As was said before in certain fields, such as Irish language arts and drama, some people said that it was difficult to get a worthwhile grant and this makes the work more difficult. Participants complained

¹ In 2014, Foras na Gaeilge ended core funding for 19 organisations throughout the country, including for 7 groups located in the six counties. Foras na Gaeilge appointed 6 ‘Lead Organisations’ to undertake various categories of work. All of these groups had their head offices in Dublin and were led by CEOs from the south.

about the bureaucracy that went with the application process, especially for small grants and that Irish language groups do not have the personnel to bid for these funds. They said that pilot funding should be available for new projects with proper research to evaluate them

Again and again participants referred to the need for more full time posts for the Irish language community. As one person said: 'It's difficult to keep your fluency if you only hear English day in and day out.' It was not clear, however, who would provide these jobs, but it was obvious that language legislation would have an important influence on this, since it is assumed that there will be a need to recruit more Irish speakers to finally provide the services which are necessary even now.

Participants also referred to classes in language accuracy in the workplace and to other courses aimed particularly at people's lives. They felt that modern resources would be useful, but to develop the software there would need to be investment and action from the state. A lot of people thought there should be more events at local level and that there should be 'gathering' places such as cafes and activity centres but again investment would be needed to achieve these aims. They felt that some progress had been made in recent years as capital grants from the Irish Language Investment Fund has been provided, but there was not enough funding for employing staff or to support a programme of events in these new buildings.

At the same time, some people questioned whether or not additional resources would be necessary. They said that these resources are already available but they are not be used as they should. They felt that the resources we do have could be used more and in a better way. As an example of this, they mentioned signs on buses and in hospitals and other places. According to participants, it is not new hospitals or buses that are being sought, but bilingual signage or bilingual announcements in bus depots and train stations. Signage should be widespread in the public space - for example in doctors' surgeries, in shops and in English Medium Schools. Again proper legislation would be very useful for achieving this but again there could be more done about public signage if the will were there.

The idea was also put forward that schools are a resource but that consideration should be given to the best use which can be made of them. For example if students were going to businesses regularly, they could influence employers more effectively

than having them visit a job fair once a year. With regard to theatre for example, as was mentioned already in this report, it is thought that there is a lack of finance but at the same time it is felt that there should be more links between the few companies that there are and the schools. In order to achieve this, more money would be necessary but unfortunately at present this isn't available.

There was an idea that there was a need for expert knowledge and for respect for learning for example for young people working in the education sector. Generally people felt that there was a need for capacity through education and that more specialist services could be developed, for example first aid, health, sport. It was also agreed that there was a need for more research with a more strategic role focused on language planning and it undertaken by people with recognised expertise. It was said that planning should be done based on policy and policy developed on evidence.

People believed that there is an increased awareness among councillors and council workers about their responsibility towards the Irish speaking community, because at the moment it is the community itself that is responsible for providing every aspect of life through the medium of Irish and with the appointment of an Irish language officer there is an opportunity to develop new partnerships.

What are the additional resources which are needed and from where?

The majority of participants said that these should be paid for by the state, through local councils, government departments and service providers.

Some mentioned that POBAL should conduct research into which government organisations have responsibility for the Irish language and encourage them to set aside part of their budget to provide these services.

It was agreed that new ways are needed to raise money for the language. As one person said, it would take £1,000,000 to support existing services in Belfast alone.

Other points and recommendations

There were many points raised at the end of the focus groups. It was pointed out that the Irish speaking community has achieved many things and that these should be recognised and celebrated. As one person said 'We have nothing to prove, we can be confident in ourselves.'

The participants saw the need to increase the number of fluent speakers of Irish through building up their confidence and through practice, practice and more practice in an Irish speaking environment. Again people mentioned the need for more posts requiring Irish to help the increase in people coming into the job market with language skills but also to increase the number of services which would be available in Irish. It was also felt that it would be helpful if schools and organisations had their own language policy when organising events etc or which hiring large numbers. Leadership and encouragement are needed to make Irish the language of communication in businesses; schools etc. are to lead the way with the language. It is understood that it is beneficial to bring in people from the locality to add to knowledge and understanding of the language but the needs of the Irish speaking community must be met too. There is a need to balance these two requirements.

As for learning Irish, it was thought important to make online resources available so that people can learn or practise in their own time, particularly at first. Then they can become more confident so that they go out and use the language.

There is very useful shared work being done by different organisations and this should be nurtured and encouraged so that these organisations do not go into competition with one another nor should personal tensions come to the fore. One person said that we should entice people into the Irish speaking world instead of discouraging them and that if we had a better life, this would come naturally.

Research Conclusions

Both pride and realism were expressed about the achievements of the Irish language community over recent years. Almost everyone mentioned the significant increase in the number of Irish speakers and saw it as a positive, healthy sign. Participants saw that there would be an improvement in the status of the language because of the increase in Irish speakers. Unsurprisingly, they were very critical of the input of the

business and public sectors. They thought that there was neglect of language speakers this will not be solved until there is strong legislation in place. They see that there are gaps in the provision that schools and Irish language organisations provide at present but it is also recognised that they are carrying a heavy burden which includes a lot of responsibilities which should be undertaken by the state.

It was evident in the debate in the focus groups that the participants had analytical skills. They saw the difficulties of the questions while examining the strengths and weaknesses and in increasing confidence of the more vulnerable groups in the community and put forward a number of practical and aspirational suggestions.

At times at the beginning of the focus groups it was clear that some people were surprised to be taking part when they didn't have great confidence in their Irish. It became clear quickly however that this was the central question in all their work and that they all had anecdotal advice for people who either stopped learning or speaking the language at different points in their lives. In spite of this personal knowledge, it was clear that the participants were focusing mainly- but not exclusively- on those who are still involved in the learning process – in night classes or in formal schooling. While acknowledging this a number of people said that the Irish language community cannot do everything at the one time. The educators especially recognised that a wide strategic plan which would benefit both Irish medium education and teacher training. They thought that this type of vision, mission, curriculum, teacher training and other subjects should be included in it Participants felt that it was useful that confidence should be at the head of the list- or as near it as possible for those starting out. One employer said that the question of confidence did not feature for potential candidates in his organisation because fluency in Irish was included in the essential criteria. Interestingly, one other employer said that candidates were surprised to find that Irish was an advantage even when applying to an Irish language organisation. He thought they were taking their fluency for granted and that they did not see the value of it outside school. It is possible in these cases that the difference can be explained by the perception in the sort of work- work in Irish language media in one instance and childcare in the other since it would seem that the children would not be speaking Irish-yet! More research is needed to explore this.

Everyone mentioned the need for more jobs using Irish and the need for councils and government departments to encourage the use of the language in the workplace. As well as Irish speaking receptionists and signs in Irish there should be classes, opportunities for speaking, improvers' courses etc available in work. They suggested that there should be language leaders, heroes and peer educators in every company to encourage the use of the language.

The participants agreed that it would be helpful to have more cooperation between educators and those on the ground. As one person said 'It takes a whole community to raise a child with Irish'. It is evident that there is a great need for things that help a person to live their whole life through Irish, their work life, their social life and their education. People praised the cooperation among Irish language groups but felt that a concerted public effort would be a great advantage. They felt there was a need for more events and especially for those targeted at specific groups. They saw the advantages of local events and especially those opportunities for using the language which are on your doorstep. Obviously they saw the need for more funding to allow these events to take place. Some of them felt, however, that better use should be made of existing resources and that more Irish language signage would be an advantage. It was clear that the participants felt that an 'Institute' at state level was needed but they had no confidence in Foras na Gaeilge for various reasons. They felt there should be a greater range of funders and more of an understanding of the work being done within the Irish speaking community.

Participants felt that there should be proper language planning now and that it should be the responsibility of the city council in order to ensure that every district was covered. Public support from the council would also help to raise perceptions of the language in the wider community. Some felt that a comprehensive strategy is needed to influence the ordinary person.

There was a wide ranging discussion about the Irish medium education sector. It was agreed that great work had taken place over time and that a strategy was needed to ensure its development in the future. Additionally, the teaching of Irish in English speaking schools was discussed and it was felt that STEM was having a negative influence on Irish and on language learning in general.

The participants were proud of the work they were doing but felt that they were not respected by politicians, by civil servants or funders for their independence and expertise. Some groups felt this was connected to the lack of emphasis on research. They felt that this could be useful particularly in the relatively new field of sociolinguistics. They felt that the community in the six counties had experiences and lessons which would be useful nationally and internationally to those looking at bilingualism and language revival.

Recommendations

- 1 In light of the responses with regard to resources for the community, economic development and community planning, that Belfast City Council in conjunction with other relevant organisations and the Irish speaking community undertake a city- wide project on 'Irish language planning'
2. That the Irish language officer works with all the interested parties to develop a public initiative to raise perceptions of the language in the wider community.
- 3 More funding to be given to Irish language groups organising capacity building events and learning events for specific groups within the community.
- 4 Additional funding for research into the dividend the Irish language brings to the life of the city.

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