

Irish Language Teaching in Poland: A Reflection

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Abstract:

This essay is a reflection on the significance of Irish language teaching outside of Ireland and the challenges which Irish teachers abroad face. With a focus on the significance of Irish teaching in Poland, it opens up debate about the proper contextualisation of Irish language programmes within Irish Studies courses. It also makes recommendations about future directions for Irish language teaching outside of Ireland and suggests the establishment of a professional network for Irish teachers.

Keywords: Irish language, Irish-Polish relations, Irish studies programmes, language education, university teaching

In Poland, the Irish language is taught at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. These universities are just two of several throughout Europe and North America to provide instruction in the Irish language, often under the patronage of the An Ghaeilge Thar Lear (Irish Abroad Scheme), which provides subsidies to universities outside Ireland to teach the modern language to students. In the academic year 2014-2015, nineteen third-level institutions in Europe and North America received money under the scheme, while considerable funding was granted to the Fulbright Commission and to the Ireland Canada University Foundation (Department of Arts 2015).

Since 2004, Ireland and Poland have developed strong links, as the former, with the United Kingdom and Sweden, were the only European Union states to allow unlimited immigration by nationals of the EU Accession States. Of these accession states, Poland was the principal sending country to the established EU members (Kahanec, Zimmermann 2009, 7). According to the 2006 Census of Ireland, there were 63,276 Poles living in the Republic of Ireland, dispersed throughout the country. By the time of the 2011 Census this figure had almost doubled to 122,585. The 2011 Census also recorded that 8,928 Polish nationals were born in Ireland (CSO 2012, 18; 37).

Polish influence is very strong in Ireland. The Polish language is commonly heard there, while there are Polish shops and a lively cultural effort. The Polska Éire Festival, held in late March 2015, was a nationwide festival of Polish culture, and its links with Ireland. The Irish Polish Society, a voluntary group whose history extends back to 1979, organises a range of cultural and educational events to promote cultural understanding between Ireland and Poland. The Polish Social and Cultural Association (POSK) is directed primarily towards Poles in Ireland, and exists “to preserve the bond among Polish people living in Ireland, to promote Polish culture, art, and native tradition, and to cultivate and develop national identity”. Among its services are a Polish library and Polish language classes (POSK Website). There are also numerous Polish schools throughout Dublin and the rest of the country which offer some schooling through Polish to the children of Polish speakers. Thus, there are several organisations which both maintain the distinctiveness of Polish culture in Ireland, and seek to share it with those of other origins living there.

This cultural exchange is largely one-directional, as the Irish presence in Poland is very small. The Irish-Polish Cultural Foundation, based in Poznań, supports events related to Irish culture, most notably during the week around St. Patrick’s Day. Nonetheless, the cultural exchange between Ireland and Poland occurs almost entirely in an Irish context, leaving little possibility to explore issues of integration and mutual perceptions as they might develop in Poland. Irish language instruction in Poland goes some way towards redressing this imbalance, albeit in a formal academic setting. It allows students to sample an important aspect of Irish culture and society while simultaneously broadening their linguistic competence. Should graduates of Irish language programmes decide to move to Ireland, their background in the language can provide them with increased employment and social opportunities as they make use of their broader linguistic skills in the process of integration. Clearly, proficiency in English is essential to integration in Ireland but familiarity with the Irish language can enrich immigrants’ ability to socialise and network.

A number of methodological issues arise with regard to the teaching of Irish in Poland, and these concerns are not limited to a Polish context. In contrast with languages such as English, Irish is taught far less frequently, and is something of a niche interest. Consequently, Irish teachers suffer from a lack of a support network and literature in which the methodology of teaching Irish to adults in an international context is reflected upon and developed. Irish teachers abroad also suffer from a lack of choice with regard to textbooks, as there is little material available that is suitable for adults. This leads to the formulation and compilation of materials by teachers themselves, but the lack of a forum in which to share, disseminate, and criticise such materials poses a significant weakness. It also means that a spirit of collegiality

and co-operation is missing from the endeavour to teach Irish abroad, and demonstrate its potential as an international language. Moreover, a possible wealth of resources is left untapped as materials which have been developed by individual teachers goes unshared and unrecognised.

At Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Irish language courses are offered within the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures, which itself is located within the Faculty of English. English students may elect to pursue a 'Celtic specialisation' within their English degree, and so they follow courses offered by the department as well as courses with other English students. The BA Celtic programme lasts three years, and students may also undertake an MA degree, which lasts two years. Undergraduate students begin studying Irish in their second year, and complete a total of 240 hours of instruction prior to graduation. Examination is by means of a written test and a compulsory oral assessment. They also take some courses on Irish literature, history, and culture. Irish is the second language within the Celtic Department, as students focus on study of the Welsh language and complementary courses related to Welsh culture. MA students have a total of 150 hours of Irish language instruction.

Students of Celtic and Irish language courses in Poznań impress with their respect for Irish culture and their enthusiasm for the language. In my experience they are ambitious and strive to constantly improve their proficiency in Irish. They take the initiative in organising student events that promote the language among the wider student body. Teaching Irish in Poznań is a positive experience for teachers who can benefit from an atmosphere of collaborative learning with their students at both BA and MA level.

The fact that Irish language courses are often available within the context of English or Celtic studies programmes is a matter of some concern. Irish is a means of communication which can be taught in terms of grammar and syntactical structures. However, it is also the bearer and product of complex historical processes and political debates. The Irish language has been subject to the processes of Irish history, ultimately falling foul of them. Meanwhile its literature offers a representation of the effects of such processes on the populace. In the modern period, the revival of the Irish language was strongly associated with the nationalist movement and the Irish language occupies an important place in Irish national identity. The language itself has evolved greatly throughout the modern period and it has a considerable variety and richness of dialects, with which any serious student of Irish should have some familiarity.

The language is often politicised in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and it is imperative that students are given the opportunity to explore government policy and public attitudes towards the language, and the debates in which it can become embroiled. The intermittent ridicule of the Irish language by certain Northern Irish Unionist politicians involves

it in populist politics and xenophobia. In the Republic of Ireland, matters concerning the Irish language can be a source of embarrassment to the government, such as the resignation of the former Irish Language Commissioner, Seán Ó Cuirreáin. In December 2013, Ó Cuirreáin stated that he was resigning from his position due to the failure of the government to implement the provisions of the Official Languages Act, which was enacted in order to ensure a certain minimum of public services through Irish and to promote the expansion of such services, by means of language schemes (Ó Caollaí 2013).

Students of Irish deserve to have access to courses on Irish politics, socio-linguistics, history, and culture in order to gain a fuller understanding of the context in which Irish is spoken and to grasp the complexities that accompany study of the language. As people with an undoubted enthusiasm for the language, they have a right to be provided with an education such that they can develop informed opinions about the language, and contribute to debates about its place in the Irish public service, educational system, and status in the European Union. It is inappropriate for Irish language courses abroad to be offered within programmes that lack a strong focus on Irish studies, or which provide too broad a complement of courses in areas such as Anglophone studies or Celtic studies. Such generalist programmes impede the ability of students to obtain an in-depth and meaningful knowledge of a coherent area of inter-related subjects.

General Irish studies programmes which allow for in-depth exploration of the literature, history, and socio-linguistics of the language present the ideal context for Irish language instruction. Irish cannot and should not be divorced from the study of Anglophone cultures, or of other Celtic languages and cultures. However, it is vital that it forms part of a programme that systematically builds the student's understanding of Irish culture and society. Stand-alone Irish studies programmes offer the best way forward to ensure that students receive a broad formation beyond linguistic competence and to ensure that they can relate their language skills to the culture to which it belongs.

In order to strengthen the vitality of Irish teaching in Poland and other countries, Irish teachers might consider establishing a professional network through which they can share materials, reflections, and ideas. This can only lead to the enrichment of Irish teaching abroad. A further possibility could be the establishment of annual meetings to discuss developments both in Irish teaching abroad and in the teaching of Irish to adults generally. This could ideally be supported by the Irish Abroad Scheme, but could also be achieved by teachers acting independently.

The matter of teaching Irish in the context of Irish Studies programmes is a far more ambitious aim, which would require the support of university management and efforts to gauge the extent of student demand for such programmes. An initial way forward would be to engage with academics in the

area of Anglo-Irish literature, who would be key to such an endeavour. The impetus for such programmes would also need to extend to Irish historians and minority language linguists.

From the perspective of Irish-Polish relations, such contextualisation of Irish courses could also contribute to mutual understanding between the two countries in which Irish is taught, as graduates of Irish studies courses gain employment in the cultural industries or public service and play a crucial role in nourishing the developing and maturing links between the two nations.

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