

Gaelic in the workplace: helping to create linguistic capacity

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Abstract: Proficiency in Gaelic can be of benefit in many job areas, from teaching to the entertainment industry and the public service. Public sector organisations are now being asked by the promotional body for Gaelic, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, to create Gaelic Language Plans, i.e. to describe the ways in which they will incorporate Gaelic into their workplace and work practices. This means of integrating Gaelic into the public sector is modelled on language planning for Welsh in Wales, where similar schemes have been highly successful in helping to support the language and its users. However, the number of Gaelic speakers within Scotland is far smaller than that of Welsh speakers in Wales. Therefore, a key challenge facing Scottish organisations is capacity for provision. In other words, organisations may struggle in their efforts to integrate Gaelic within their day-to-day operations and to make an active offer of Gaelic service. It is therefore necessary to create long-term solutions to the issue of linguistic capacity, and this paper reviews the efficacy of 'language learning' as a method of building linguistic capacity for the integration of Gaelic into the workplace.

Keywords: Gaelic; Scotland; linguistic capacity; language learning

1. Introduction

One of the key concerns for language policy in the European Union (EU) and beyond is the promotion of minority languages through overt planning procedures. Language policies geared toward the development of minority languages can, of course, take on many forms and cater to many interests. In the case of Gaelic in Scotland, for example, we have comprehensive national policies (i.e. The National Plan for Gaelic 2007-2012, Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007a), targeted educational policies (i.e. The National Gaelic Education Strategy, Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007b), as well as policies at local and organisational level (these are sometimes called Gaelic Language Plans). These policies primarily focus upon the promotion of Gaelic alongside English in the northwest of the country, and overall development of Gaelic is most strongly geared toward education and media. The statutory creation of Bòrd na Gàidhlig through the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 has meant that the attention given to policy interventions have gained prominence, and that the number of these policies is growing. Increasingly, it is policy itself that has become the focus of scholarly criticism for Gaelic language planning, with recent articles by Dunbar (2006), Macleod (2007), and Walsh & McLeod (2008).

2008 saw the extension of the Bòrd's influence to public organisations as they began soliciting Gaelic Language Plans. These plans, which are modelled on Welsh Language Schemes, invite participating organisations to formalise their policy for Gaelic provision, emphasizing the need to make an active offer of Gaelic service when interacting with the public (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007a). In other words, Gaelic Language Plans encourage public organisations to allow the public to receive service in Gaelic if they so choose.

However, as Walsh & McLeod (2008) observe with policies that act as precursors to Gaelic Language Plans, it is challenging for policy makers to create documents that adequately acknowledge the practical implications of bilingual language provision (2008). Indeed, one of the most serious challenges facing policy makers in a Scottish context is a lack of linguistic capacity to enact policy commitments due largely to the small number of Gaelic speakers within Scotland. Only 1.2% of the Scottish public reported the ability to speak Gaelic in the most recent census in 2001, and fewer still reported to have reading and writing skills (GROS 2005). With such a small proportion of Scotland's inhabitants being able to use Gaelic, it is intuitively understood that many organisations may not have members of staff who are currently able to use Gaelic for work purposes, and therefore these organisations do not currently have the staffing capacity to integrate Gaelic into their daily operations.

Thus it can be problematic for public organisations to offer services in Gaelic. Employing capable and confident Gaelic speakers is not always possible, and organisations meet additional problems when a position that previously required only monolingual abilities evolves into a bilingual-essential post. For example, a public organisation with a Gaelic Language Plan would ideally have bilingual reception staff so that people phoning in could use either Gaelic or English. In cases such as these, an organisation's existing staff might not be suitably qualified to offer Gaelic services, and this presents a critical problem for the development and implementation of Gaelic Language Plans.

One possible solution in light of such conflicts is to limit policy at the organisational level to commitments that are immediately achievable. However, in many cases this would mean that ensuing Gaelic Language Plans would be meagre. Moreover, to limit policy in such a way would likely undermine the ethos of equality underpinning these policies. Conversely, to encourage policy makers to enter into unachievable agreements due to insufficient resources would be tantamount to tokenism since organisations would find themselves in a situation in which they were genuinely unable to act upon their good intentions. However, if organisations incorporate the development of linguistic capacity as part of their Gaelic Language Plans they can aim toward the integration of Gaelic into the workplace and into work practices over a specified amount of time and this notion of developing of linguistic capacity through policy has been discussed by Grin (2003). Unsurprisingly, many of Scotland's approved Gaelic Language Plans to date have made such commitments and these will be discussed in more depth below.

We begin from a standpoint that considers the development of linguistic capacity an essential part of policies aiming toward equal provision for a minority language. From there we consider the practicality of using language learning as one specific technique aimed at developing capacity. It is generally accepted that language learning is a prolonged and involved process, yet it is often cited as a method for achieving increased linguistic capacity within policies regarding the provision of Gaelic. Using real policy examples and semi-structured interviews, the present paper uses a qualitative approach to discuss the benefits and limitations of language learning as a tool for linguistic capacity development.

2. Context

Gaelic is a minority language in Scotland and has been increasingly so since about the 11th century (MacKinnon 2001). The pressure to reverse language shift for Gaelic began in earnest during the latter half of the 20th century, and saw a turning point with the creation of Comunn na Gàidhlig¹ in the mid 80s, and the passing of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act in 2005. Nevertheless, the position of Gaelic in Scotland is tentative, as it is spoken by only a small proportion of Scotland's 5 million inhabitants (1.2% according to the 2001 census) and most of these are positioned in the northwest, in the Skye and Lochalsh areas of Highland Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles). The 2001 census also tells us that the Gaelic community is aging and that intergenerational transmission is low. This is worrying as both factors are considered to be key to language sustainability (Fishman 1991). Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the organisation in charge of Gaelic development, has been created out of the 2005 Act in order to help plan for the language's future. Since its statutory establishment, the Bòrd has created a clear National Plan for Gaelic 2007-2012 (2007a) aimed at reversing language shift. The idea is to increase the use and prevalence of Gaelic through various means including the creation of Gaelic Language Plans by public organisations.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig has the right to invite public organisations to write Gaelic Language Plans, which are detailed policies describing the intended parameters for Gaelic use when dealing with the public. The first six organisations invited to author a Gaelic Language Plan included the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government and the Highlands & Islands Enterprise, as well as three local authorities: Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council), Highland Council and Argyll & Bute Council. These approved Gaelic Language Plans comprise the focus of our textual analyses for Gaelic language policy. However, long before the Bòrd began soliciting such plans from the aforementioned bodies organisations with Gaelic interests have had policies geared toward the language's use, which are of equal relevance to our topic. These organisations may have articulated their Gaelic policies in different methods (i.e. they may be unwritten policies about when and how to use Gaelic), but they are still relevant to this discussion. To this end, the present paper also uses the data collected in a series of semi-structured interviews that were conducted with representatives from a variety of organisations in order to accurately reflect the place of language learning as a tool for capacity development, and to consider its practical benefits and limitations.

¹ Comunn na Gàidhlig ('Gaelic Language Society', <http://www.cnag.org.uk>) was founded in 1984 by the then Scottish Office to co-ordinate developments in Gaelic language policy. This organisation was instrumental in helping to draft the bid for Secure Status for Gaelic that eventually passed as the Gaelic Language Act (Scotland) 2005 and is still active today.

3. Overt Policy

In the four aforementioned Gaelic Language Plans, there is little indication of the reason for which language learning is needed as a core commitment among other commitments being agreed in the language policy. Following the guidelines of the Bòrd itself (2007c), most plans include language learning as one among three commitments being made under the heading of Staffing (the exception is Comhairle nan Eilean Siar as will be discussed later).

For Highland Council, a local authority that contains a high proportion of Gaelic speakers, the provision of language education will be for those without sufficient (particularly literate) fluency, or indeed any knowledge of Gaelic whatsoever. The council will provide access to learning and aim toward “an accredited job-specific Gaelic course for employees of the Council and of other public sector agencies” (Highland Council 2008: 17). However, the resource implications of this kind of programme are clear, as the plan admits that secondments and sabbaticals will be required to support language learning. The provisions for language learning being described in this plan seem to be oriented toward employee interest, rather than responsive to the needs being created in other provisions.

A good contrast to this plan is that of Argyll & Bute Council (2008), which goes into somewhat more detail about the situations in which language learning will be required. It specifies the need to create a language proficiency register and makes note of the special issue of literacy. The Council clearly states that language learning, including up-skilling, should be considered and encouraged under Performance Development initiatives and that the goal should be fluency. They provide a list of different service areas from which they will select staff members who are public facing, and these will be given language training in the first instance in order to “conduct initial conversation” in Gaelic, and then be encouraged toward fluency (ibid: 17). In this way, the plan makes clearer reference to the reason language learning is required: in order to fulfil the active language demands created through other commitments of the policy. Of particular interest within this policy is Appendix A, which provides a report on a previous consultation for the draft plan. This states that “the general agreement amongst respondents was that members of staff have to be trained beyond a basic level. Council staff who are currently attending the language course are learning how to respond in Gaelic to a point where they can pass an enquiry onto someone with Gaelic language fluency” (ibid: 54). The issue of language proficiency is one that is largely bypassed in policies, but it is interesting to note that in consultation a concern was expressed regarding the notion that language learning does not necessarily result in language fluency.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CES), the local authority in which the highest proportion and density of Gaelic speakers live, draws a distinction between the language learning to be offered to bilingual and non-bilingual staff. For this council, bilingual staff are of particular concern, as it is understood that many with the capability to use Gaelic lack the confidence or comfort to do so. The council states that a course will be provided to

interested staff that will aim to build confidence for language use. However, the resource implications of this initiative are that backfilling for employees (putting a new staff member into an existing post) becomes necessary, and the council makes clear note of this issue (CES 2007: 15). For non-bilingual staff, encouragement and opportunity to learn are paramount. The council states that at present provision is “sporadic, with little follow-up support” (ibid: 16), and their intent is to create a more structured approach to language learning for employees who are not at all proficient in Gaelic. However, the council does not feel this is something they will accomplish internally and so the resource implications are high, including the need to outsource for learning programmes, and backfilling, as well as financial considerations.

Scottish Parliament Corporate Body (SPCB) currently have a Learning Resource centre which includes Gaelic resources. They also offer classes in a language training scheme, and through this scheme employees may receive funding to be taught Gaelic (SPCB 2008: 24). However, all staff involved in the Gaelic Language Plan have access to training in Gaelic and this, perhaps shows the same internal link as was noted in the Argyll and Bute plan, in which those implicated by the language policy must have access to learning opportunities for the policy to be enacted.

These four Gaelic Language Plans demonstrate the important place of language learning within overt policies aiming to increase Gaelic provision. Many practical implementation concerns are acknowledged within the documents, including the identification of learners, the location and structure of education, the costs of education (e.g. who will pay, what happens when the employee is absent due to language learning activities), as well as how such up-skilling will be regarded from an organisational level (i.e. as professional development). However, the need for language learning as a component of capacity development, as well as its actual impact both beneficial and problematical are perhaps better understood if we look not to overt policies, but to the people who actually work with and under such policies. In the next section, selections from a series of semi-structured interviews will be used to deepen understanding of language learning within language policies.

4. Representations of Policy

Although language learning is a component of linguistic capacity development consistent with, if not required by, an overt language policy, it is certainly a challenge with regard to enactment. In the summer of 2008, a series of interviews were conducted in order to gather better understanding of how actual organisations use Gaelic and Gaelic policies in the workplace. These interviews provide a complicated picture of how language learning fits into language policy.

The first interviewee, a museum curator, works within a particularly interesting field example. Although the museum in which this curator works falls within the remit of one of the aforementioned Gaelic Language Plans, and actively uses Gaelic in its passive service provision (i.e. bilingual signage, forms, etc.) it is unable to engage in active Gaelic use because it has no fluent users on staff. The curator explains,

“we don’t have any people who are confident with Gaelic. It’s interesting, I had a conversation the other day about do you use a smattering of Gaelic on the phone or not? And until you have somebody who is capable and confident about holding entire conversations in Gaelic, it’s tokenism.”

Despite these reservations, language learning itself was not a part of this museum’s development plan and, being a small museum, it also has no need to hire new staff (and thus has no ability to recruit employees with Gaelic ability in order to make active service provision a possibility). Language learning was not regarded as a relevant or appropriate method of achieving capacity development for this particular museum. Given the small staff size of the organisation and because all members of staff were regarded as qualified before Gaelic became a focal point of service provision, the personal reasons that prohibited members of staff from learning Gaelic (or made this an undesirable option) meant that no members of staff were accessing this kind of education. Thus, rather than participating in capacity development, this museum out-sourced all materials to be published to an independent Gaelic translator. Indeed this out-sourcing was a highly effective technique used by the curator to bypass the need for capacity development, whilst achieving language provision goals to a high calibre. Moreover, and given the immediacy of demands for Gaelic provision that was placed upon the curator, this out-sourcing was the curator’s only legitimate option in order to achieve other language commitments and by comparison language learning became an unnecessary commitment.

The second interviewee comes from an exceedingly different personal and professional background from the first. This hotel manager was a fluent and native speaker of Gaelic, and worked within a hotel that actively encouraged Gaelic use, but in no overt capacity. In this example, the hotel allowed permanent staff members time away from work in order to participate in Gaelic language courses, and offered staff members of over two years a financial bonus for participating in a 40 minute conversation in the language. The hotel manager, who was nonplussed by the use of Gaelic in business, particularly in internal operations, suggested that her staff were

“very enthusiastic about it [Gaelic use] ... and I think because of the incentive, you know, people are a bit more willing to try.”

In this instance, and alongside the opportunity to take time away from work in order to take a short course in Gaelic, there were informal learning opportunities within the business, where

“those who speak Gaelic use it and try and help people, those who are struggling and those who are learning”.

In this sense, the financial incentive operated in coordination with strong social support to encourage non-users and users with poor confidence or skills to develop language skills. However, the hotel manager was very clear that Gaelic was used for internal practices but not for external or point-of-contact. In these instances of external interaction, all that would be demanded of the employee would be token phrases of

welcome, including good morning, evening and afternoon—the kinds of phrases easily learned by employees without need of language learning courses. Thus, a second example might demonstrate how language learning is an important component of language policy in the instance that the employee’s position demands active and meaningful interaction either externally or, as in this case, internally through the medium of Gaelic.

A third example comes from a financial manager affiliated with the same enterprise as the hotel manager above, but this interviewee oversees several other small companies as well as the hotel business in question. Again, a native and fluent speaker of Gaelic, the respondent had been integral in writing and integrating a Gaelic clause into new contracts for employees, in which a financial incentive was offered for participating in a 40 minute interview in Gaelic after two years of employment. To capitalise on this incentive was entirely voluntary, but as the financial manager explains, it was written in order to encourage language learning. Of primary concern from a managerial point of view was

“to ensure that it [the language clause] wasn’t going to be discriminatory in any way. It had to go through the employment consultants who actually did water it down. The clause now refers to making your best endeavours, best reasonable effort rather than basically saying: you will learn Gaelic.”

This legal issue was of note within the context of this particular company, but certainly has applicability in other contexts as well, particularly if Gaelic Language Plans are introduced after non-Gaelic employees have been hired. To force an employee into language learning has legal complications, but to have front-line staff without the language may compromise the stated language commitments. The solution found within this financial manager’s company was to target employee motivation for language learning. The aforementioned financial incentive was one method of targeting motivation a second was to make language learning both accessible in terms of time and cost. The manager explains:

“In previous years people were either asked to take a holiday or to pay for the course ... to go. And there [was] little or no uptake at all, but since it’s been offered as free time off and no cost to the employee, a lot more people have volunteered.”

Whilst offering language learning courses in this way may help to increase uptake on courses it also shifts the cost of learning from the employee to the company. Although this same technique is part of the Gaelic Language Plans within the public sector discussed above, this approach may not always be feasible for private enterprises.

5. Discussion of Findings

The present article has addressed the place of language learning within policies aimed at Gaelic language use. First overt policy examples, four Gaelic Language Plans, were discussed and these addressed some of the pragmatic issues of providing language

learning as a means of building capacity for Gaelic use. These included the creation of language proficiency registers, choosing times and places for language learning, and addressing the costs and purposes of language learning. A second approach has complicated the position of language learning as a tool, which builds capacity for other language provisions by looking at practical examples. Semi-structured interviews showed the perceived need for language learning could be bypassed through outsourcing in some cases. It also demonstrated that language learning may be a result of internal rather than external practice. Finally, it showed the difficulty that has been encountered when trying to appeal to employees to capitalise upon opportunities to learn. The cost of uptake for language learning may, indeed, be more than that of the course itself and backfilling, but may need to include social support and even financial incentives.

Future research should consider the practicality of language learning as a tool through which to build linguistic capacity, in terms of the time it takes for employees to achieve competence in the target language. Although some courses boast fast and efficient learning, it has been shown that linguistic capability does not necessarily equate to ease in speaking the language. Even where employees have been trained to be sufficiently versed in Gaelic to hold small conversations, they may not choose to do so when the opportunity or indeed the need arises.

Perhaps the greatest hope for the future integration of Gaelic into Scottish organisations and public service is not language learning as a part of workplace training, but the learning that is occurring in primary and secondary classrooms throughout Scotland. According to recent SQA figures², the numbers of Scottish youngsters accessing Gaelic learning is increasing. Whether these students are learning through the medium of Gaelic and operating at high levels of proficiency, or only beginning to learn the language when they enter secondary school, these students have the opportunity to become capable in a language that is increasingly marketable within Scotland, where the proliferation of Gaelic Language Plans helps to create a need for capable and confident Gaelic speakers. Pairing state learning and opportunities for professional development may be the key to creating an achievable and sustainable integration of Gaelic into public service provision.

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² <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/7750.902.html> (starting page for SQA statistical information)

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