

## Widening the lens on technology-mediated Irish language learning policy and practice to enable Irish language, technology, and education policy alignment, integration, and enactment at school level

Jane O'Toole<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, Trinity College, Dublin, , [otooleja@tcd.ie](mailto:otooleja@tcd.ie)

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### Abstract

*Learner engagement with the Irish language in English-medium education (EME) in Ireland has been an area of concern in recent years (Inspectorate, 2022; Devitt et al., 2018). The lack of opportunity for learners to experience Irish as a living language outside of school exacerbates the situation. Technology-mediated language learning can provide learners with much-needed opportunities to consolidate Irish language learning as well as engage with the language across a range of authentic contexts and develop language learner networks. As the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 unfolds, this paper explores both Irish language education and digital education policy (Department of Education, 2022) at primary level within the broader context of national Irish language policy. Engagement with the Irish language at primary EME level is firstly explored in parallel with current digital learning policy at school level. Irish language (Government of Ireland, 2010; 2018) and Irish language digital policy (Ní Chasaide et al., 2022) at national level are then examined with reference to Irish language education. The exploration of Irish language policy domains seeks to address the question: how can the development of technology-mediated language learning be optimised in the context of Irish language teaching, learning, and engagement in the EME primary sector? Recommendations to support (technology-mediated) Irish language learning at EME primary level are suggested with reference to potential policy alignment and enactment.*

**Keywords:** *Irish language education policy, digital learning policy, primary school, learner engagement.*

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## 1. Introduction

The precarity of the Irish language is an ongoing concern in Irish society and the domain of education remains central to Irish language revitalisation efforts. An official language of the state along with English, the Irish language also bears the complex status of also being a native, heritage, and endangered language. The most recent census figures (Central Statistics Office, 2023) indicate a further decrease in native Irish speakers who use Irish outside the education system (71,968- a decrease of 1,835 since 2016) while reporting an increase in the number of people who claim some level of competency in the language (an increase of 6% between 2016 and 2022). Despite growth and development of and the Irish-immersion Education (IME), the Irish language continues to struggle in English-Medium Education (EME) which accounts for 92% of primary schools in the

Republic of Ireland (Gaeloideachas, 2023). Attainment in the Irish language amongst English-medium primary school goers has witnessed a steady decline since the 1980s and out-of-school use opportunities remain challenging to find and to facilitate. It is argued that technology-mediated language learning in endangered language contexts, such as Irish, can provide learners with dedicated opportunities to expand both their language learning and learning networks.

As Figure 1 illustrates, primary education policy is central to the point of departure of this policy review. Recent policy and practice is firstly examined with a focus on: (i) Irish language engagement; and (ii) the role of technology in primary education. National Irish language policy is then explored in order to identify common ground and alignment to further support the development of technology-mediated learning of Irish at primary level. The broader context of endangered languages and less commonly taught languages is then considered as a further lens for policy development. Finally, a series of recommendations are made in relation to education policy and practice in order to progress and enhance learners' opportunities to experience more integrated technology-mediated learning with respect to the Irish language at primary level in English-medium education.

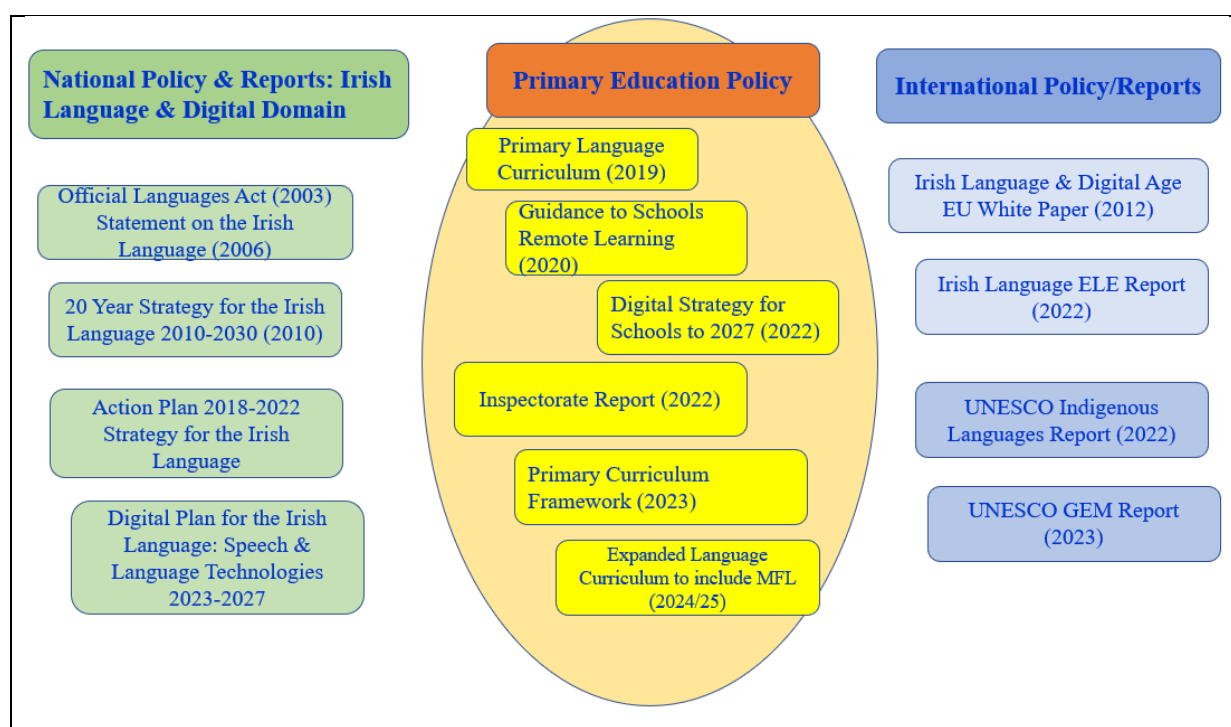


Figure 1. Outline of relevant education and language policy domains

## 2. Irish language learners and digital learning at primary level

Children's attainment in the Irish language in primary EME has been in decline in recent decades (Harris, 2008), coupled with excess disengagement with the language in comparison to other subjects (e.g. Maths, Literacy) (Devitt et al., 2018). The most recent Inspectorate<sup>1</sup> report (Inspectorate, 2022) identified the teaching and learning of Irish language at primary level as an overarching key concern clearing stating that "pupils' learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement in Irish need to be improved" (Inspectorate, 2022, p.105). It was noted that during the 2016-2020 period of inspections, students' attainment of learning objectives was good or very good in only 67% of lessons evaluated during notified inspections, and that the quality of learning outcomes during unannounced inspections was good or very good in 72% of instances; both figures highlight the potential to improve the quality of children's learning experiences. In addition, it was outlined that children's learning of

<sup>1</sup> The Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education which coordinates and leads the evaluation of primary and secondary schools and education centres.

Irish had “suffered disproportionately” during the pandemic (Inspectorate, 2022, p.115) which further exacerbates Irish language efforts.

Notably, it was also identified that teachers should “make greater use of digital technology to support relevant and meaningful learning experiences in the teaching and learning of Irish” (Inspectorate, 2022, p.114). More generally, scope to enhance and embed children’s engagement with digital technologies across the curriculum was identified, whereby only 54% of pupils surveyed reported use of digital technology in some lessons. While the role of technology in primary education in Ireland can be further enhanced, it is nonetheless readily acknowledged that schools’ development of technological platforms (Department of Education, 2020) was accelerated and enhanced during the Covid-19 pandemic (Inspectorate, 2022).

### 3. Primary education digital learning policy

The Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 (Department of Education, 2022) identifies digital learning as a key component and enabler for curriculum reform. Drawing on education stakeholder consultations, the need for “existing and new curriculum specifications to provide clear opportunities for digital teaching, learning, and the assessment giving teachers a clear rationale for using digital technology” (Department of Education, 2022, p.8) in primary and secondary education is acknowledged. The Digital Strategy places digital learning as an integrated and essential component of children’s learning experience across the primary curriculum with a supporting focus on the importance of teacher professional learning to facilitate this. The importance of embedding technology in teaching and learning for the purpose of nurturing digital competence of students is clearly communicated. Direct links with the potential of digital platforms and engagement for Irish language learning, however, are not explicit. This is understandable given the broader remit and scope of the Strategy which, similar to the Primary Curriculum Framework (National Council for Assessment and Curriculum (NCAC), 2023), references subject groups such as literacy, language, the arts, and STEM, for example, as opposed to individual subjects. It is observed that preface of the Digital Strategy references how the Strategy itself will be instrumental in supporting developing curricular areas, such as Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and STEM; thereby referencing the ‘shininess’ of the proposed forthcoming MFL element without reference to the huge potential technology-mediated learning holds for Irish language learning and languages of the school community.

The recently launched Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023) aligns with the Digital Strategy and its predecessor by identifying *being a digital learner* as one of seven key competencies for development amongst school goers. As Figure 2 indicates, *being a communicator and using language* is also recognised as a competency across the curriculum.

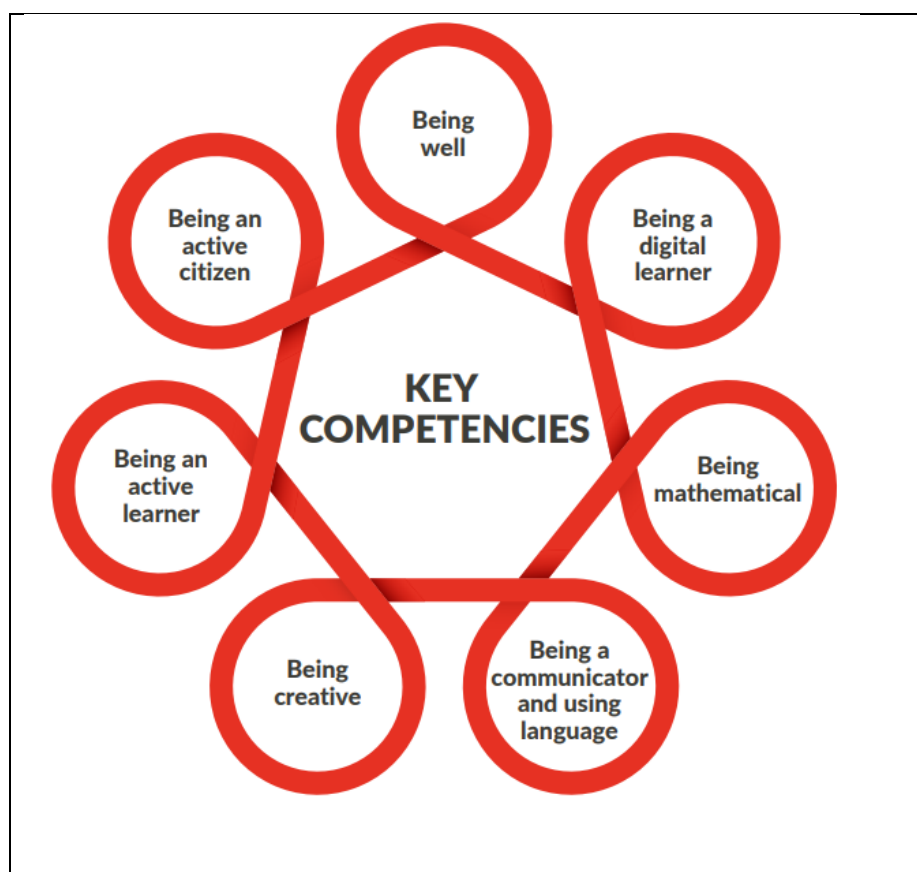


Figure 2: Key competencies for learners at primary level (NCCA, 2023, p.8)

The importance of digital literacy is reiterated in the Digital Strategy which in turn relates to the languages taught, learned, and spoken at school. Furthermore, alignment with the Primary Languages Curriculum (2019), which proposes an integrated approach to the teaching and learning of English and Irish, is outlined and acknowledges how digital literacy is set out therein as an important element of children’s language learning in the two languages of the school (Department of Education, 2022).

#### **4. Irish language and technology policy at national level**

This section explores the broader realm of: (i) national Irish language policy; and (ii) Irish language technology policy, in order to situate Irish language and technology education policy in the national (and European) context. What efforts are being made at national level in both sectors which can potentially bolster technology-mediated Irish language learning at primary EME level?

At national policy level, the noughties witnessed significant progress for Irish language policy with the launch the Official Languages Act (2003), followed by the Statement of the Irish Language (2006) which paved the way for the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language (Government of Ireland, 2010).

The 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language (2010) was initially a source of hope for learners of Irish given its detailed objectives and projections; however, the enactment of many aspects of the strategy has been widely considered ineffective. For example, the objective which seeks to increase the number of people with knowledge of Irish to two million is ill-defined and does not address contexts of use of the language nor competency.

The more recent Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022, which details the implementation of the Strategy’s objectives, arguably indicates the relative lack of integration between the domains of education and technology in the Irish language context.

Area for Action 1:	Education
Area for Action 2:	The Gaeltacht
Area for Action 3:	Family Transmission of the Language – Early Intervention
Area for Action 4:	Administration, Services and Community
Area for Action 5:	Media and Technology
Area for Action 6:	Dictionaries
Area for Action 7:	Legislation and Status
Area for Action 8:	Economic Life
Area for Action 9:	Cross-Cutting Initiatives

Figure 3: Areas for Action in Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022 (Government of Ireland, 2018)

As the structure of the Action Plan indicates, Education and Media and Technology are discreet entities. Closer examination of the actions for Education not only indicate a low proportion of actions specific to Irish language learning in English-medium education (e.g. development of a programme to support the Primary Languages Curriculum (PLC), pilot programme of partial Irish language immersion utilising CLIL), but also an absence of proposals in relation to technology-mediated Irish language learning. Reference to the provision of digital resources by Foras na Gaeilge is made explicitly for Irish-medium schools. Media and Technology actions are detailed with many spanning various domains including television, radio, the arts, digital, technology, and education. The latter focussed on third level provision. The final Area for Action 9 Cross Cutting Initiatives does not include integration of the domains of education and technology, which arguably represents an opportunity missed to align and meaningfully integrate both domains in order to further support learners of Irish.

Preceding the Language Strategy's Action Plan (2018), a White Paper (Judge et al., 2012) made recommendations for further investment and resourcing by the state to support Irish language Speech and Language (S&L) technologies, in addition to strongly advocating for the potential role of technology for Irish language learners. Ten years later, these views reflected in the European Language Equality (ELE) Report (Lynn, 2022), which also detailed the deficient status of Irish language digital infrastructure and technologies compared to other EU languages. The urgent need to develop a range of core technologies was outlined in order for the Irish language to keep pace digitally in an increasingly globalised world. While primarily addressing the fundamental advances required in the fundamental S&L technologies, the potential impact on the education sector was also highlighted citing the acute dearth of CALL tools for the language, which in turn results in the provision of outmoded Irish learning activities for students (Lynn, 2022).

The ELE report (Lynn, 2022) set the context for the long-awaited Digital Plan for the Irish Language (Ní Chasaide et al., 2022). The plan references the Adapt Centre at Dublin City University and the Phonetics and Speech Laboratory at Trinity College, Dublin, as the principal partners of commissioned research including speech synthesis technology and beta speech recognition technology system development. Significantly for education, Chapter 14 of the plan provides an extremely comprehensive account of the current speech and language technology both under development and currently utilised in the broader education domain, in addition to providing a strong rationale for the role of Irish language technologies in education in Ireland. It is of note, however, that the commissioning and implementation of the Digital Plan for the Irish Language resides with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media which has a separate remit to the Department of Education.

## 5. Conclusion: Potential steps forward in policy and practice to further facilitate technology-mediated Irish language learning in primary EME

As the Digital Plan proposes, “the symbiosis of powerful language technologies and digitally available knowledge of Irish structure – along with how it is acquired – have the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in Irish language education” (Ní Chasaide et al., 2022, p.18). However, the exploration of the policy areas of Irish language education, digital learning, Irish language, and Irish language technology development suggest a

lack of connection and integration. In order to facilitate a graduated integration of Irish S&L technologies at (primary) school level, it is recommended to further inter-departmental cooperation and collaboration at government level (between the Department of Education, and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media, for example). The establishment of a dedicated working group inclusive of all relevant education, Irish language, and digital learning stakeholders could support such collaboration. The acknowledgement, endorsement, and circulation of Chapter 14 of Digital Plan for the Irish Language by the Department of Education to all schools could simply begin a conversation with practitioners about the potential of Irish language S&L technologies in the classroom. The Inspectorate could support schools in showcasing effective practice in terms of Irish language teaching and learning drawing on S&L technologies as observed in evaluations to date. The involvement of professional support services for teachers and school leaders<sup>2</sup> and expert partners in integrating S&L technologies into dedicated Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and support for schools, informed by the commissioned Irish language research emanating from the Digital Plan in the broader context of endangered language education (UNESCO, 2021) and technology in education (UNESCO, 2023).

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<sup>2</sup> Oide (Irish language term for 'teacher') is the newly amalgamated support service for teachers and school leaders in Ireland funded by the Department of Education ([www.oide.ie](http://www.oide.ie))



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