

Bon Tralalh? Reflections and observations from Occitan immersion education – lessons for Gaelic Medium education in Scotland?

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Abstract: Gaelic Medium Education (GME) has grown in popularity since the early 1980s, but Scotland is not unique in providing an immersion minority language education programme in the public education system. This article discusses a visit by the author to the Toulouse area of France, where she joined the French School Inspectorate team tasked with supporting teachers delivering Occitan medium education at pre-primary and primary school level. The observations from visiting different Occitan Medium classrooms and speaking to children, teachers and teacher educators are then used to reflect on the differences and similarities with the Gaelic medium context here in Scotland and whether any lessons can be taken forward.

Keywords: immersion education; developing intercultural understanding; minority languages; Gaelic

Introduction

In Scotland around 3,700 children are currently enrolled in Gaelic Medium primary education across 61 locations in 14 local authorities (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2020). Although this represents a relatively small proportion, 0.9%, of the overall primary pupil population, it makes an important contribution to the efforts to support and maintain Gaelic in Scotland (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2018), with Gaelic Medium Education (GME) aiming to ensure that children achieve ‘equal fluency and literacy in both Gaelic and English’ (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (Scotland), 2011). Scotland is far from unique in providing opportunities for learning and teaching (indigenous) minority languages in the education system, with the Welsh and Irish medium education contexts perhaps the most frequently used in comparisons with the provision in Scotland (see, for example, O’Hanlon, 2014, Walsh and McLeod, 2007)

Other (non-anglophone) educational contexts have also made provisions for the inclusion of minority languages to be used as a medium of instruction in their educational model, often, as is the case for Gaelic, to support the acquisition of the language where intergenerational transmission, where the language is used in the home and passed from the caregivers to the child, is limited or has disappeared altogether (McLeod, 2010). The way and extent to which a minority language is used as a language of instruction in the classroom will vary depending on the context, but also on the national and local policies relating to language and education. Exploring these not only provides a valuable insight into different educational models, but also creates

opportunities to identify best practice and how these might be taken forward to the Gaelic Medium (GM) classrooms.

In my capacity of lecturer in Gaelic education at the University of Strathclyde, I was, therefore, delighted to be invited by the University of Bordeaux to visit their campus in Toulouse to learn about the French educational system, focussing on the role of languages in teaching and learning, including the delivery of minority language education (Occitan) in primary classrooms and discuss the role of immersion education in both Scottish and French classrooms with students, teachers, university staff and members of the French School Inspectorate. During my visit, in April 2019 I had the opportunity to speak with staff and students at Bordeaux University but was also invited to visit a range of Occitan medium classrooms; a bilingual *école maternelle* (pre-school / nursery) class in a rural setting with twenty-one children aged 2 – 6 , an inner-city middle primary school class as well as a small class of twelve 6-year-olds in a small town with a high proportion of immigrant families and high levels of socio-economic deprivation where all languages spoken across the community were celebrated and included in the teaching and learning process.

This visit to the Toulouse area provided me with a unique insight into the French educational system and the variety of different ways that languages are positioned. The role of the various languages in and for education in France was exemplified throughout my visit and resonates with many of the initiatives here in Scotland to support the teaching and learning of ‘modern foreign’ languages, heritage and community languages and Gaelic. The focus of this article will be on the way in which Occitan medium education is delivered and how this compares to Gaelic Medium Education (GME) in Scotland.

Occitan and Occitan Medium Education

Occitan, or the Oc Language (Langue d’Oc) is a member of the Romance language family and is the collective term for the 6 different language varieties (dialects), which are spoken in the southern regions of France and in neighbouring countries. All the dialects of Occitan are considered to be endangered and at risk of disappearing, in particular ‘Lengadocian’, the dialect of the region that I visited, which has been categorised as ‘severely endangered’ by UNESCO (Moseley, 2010). As has been the case for Gaelic (see MacKinnon, 2011), both the number of speakers and the use of Occitan have dramatically declined.

The increasing dominance of French in all aspects of public life, including media, public administration and education, where the use of regional language, even in the playground, was prohibited until 1983 (Escudé, 2019) has resulted in an estimated reduction of 99% of Occitan speakers over the last century (Kremnitz, 2017). This decline in speakers also meant that fewer and fewer families are bringing up their children as first language speakers of Occitan, with Occitan Medium Education only introduced into the French public education system in the early 1980s (Escudé, 2012). Occitan Medium Education, as is the case with other regional minority language

education (such as Breton), occupies a precarious position in the public education system as a result of France's institutional monolingual ideology towards language, enshrined in the second article of its constitution, which states that the language of the Republic shall be French (Määttä, 2005).

The strength of this official ideology was highlighted recently when a bill allowing the safeguarding minority languages was passed by the parliament in April 2021. This bill, also known as the 'Molac Bill' after Paul Molac, the independent MP from Brittany who presented it, would have allowed public schools to offer all subjects in a minority language. After an appeal by the Education Ministry, the Constitutional Council, France's highest constitutional authority, ruled that some of the aspects of the bill, including the clause relating to immersion education, contravened the second article of the constitution and these were subsequently removed. This has since resulted a wider constitutional debate around the position of regional languages and their inclusion in the public education system.

In the short-term the consequence of the Molac Bill amendment is that Occitan, together with other regional minority languages in France, can only be used for a maximum of 12 hours (50% of all teaching hours), with the remaining 12 hours of teaching and learning having to take place through the medium of French, as has been the case since 1983 (Escudé, 2019). The French education system has a national curriculum which consists of two stages of primary school (the Basic Learning Cycle (for pupils aged 6 to 8, including the last year of pre-school) and the Consolidation Cycle (for pupils aged 8 to 11) (Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 2015). This national curriculum is centrally organised and administered through the 18 regional authorities (Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 2020). This national curriculum follows a timetable as prescribed by the government in terms of hours allocated to each of the five curricular areas¹ on a weekly (and yearly) basis and also prescribes which language (French or a regional language) can be used (Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 2015) (see Table 1).

Subject area	Taught in French	Taught in Occitan
French	9 hours	-
Occitan	-	1 hour
Maths	-	5 hours
Physical education	1 hour 45 minutes	45 minutes
Foreign living language	45 minutes	45 minutes
Art and art history	45 minutes	1 hour 30 minutes
World exploration	45 minutes	2 hours

¹ Languages for thinking and communicating, methodologies and tools to learn, training of the individual and citizens, natural and technical systems and world representations and human activity.

Total	12 hours	12 hours
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Table 1: Distribution of subjects according to the language of instruction - adapted from Escude (2019)

The directives around the 50/50 division in teaching time is strictly adhered to in the schools and might include a “one teacher, one language” approach, where children have one teacher for the Occitan medium lessons and another teacher for the French medium lessons. The reason behind this approach is at least in part pragmatic. There is a shortage of teachers who are proficient in Occitan and able to deliver Occitan immersion education and this, therefore, allows one teacher to work with two groups of children within a setting, thus increasing the capacity for delivery. In some instances, this approach also means that children physically move between different classrooms, creating a physical separation between the two languages.

Observations and reflections from the classroom

From my visits to several different Occitan medium classrooms and speaking to the teachers it was very clear that there is a high level of awareness of the dominant position of French in the community and that this brings challenges in terms of Occitan language acquisition and use by the children. In the classrooms this was acknowledged through daily activities at the start of each session which supported the children in their transition from French, the language of the home, the community, and the school social contexts, to Occitan.

This transition was led by the teacher and although the activities varied according to the teaching cycle of the class and the children’s proficiency in Occitan, all had common elements, which will be familiar to many (immersion) teachers: taking the register, writing down the time and the date and describing the weather for the day. This allowed for the reinforcement of simple, day-to-day language. Older children would then be asked to comment on a current news story in the language (this was the week in which the roof of Notre Dame in Paris had caught fire), and younger children being asked to recall the days of the week and the numbers.

Another significant feature of the transition and early part of the session was the use of Occitan (children’s) literature, and in particular storytelling, which can be used to support the development of children’s oral language (Wright and Dunsmuir, 2019). Many of the stories used in the early years Occitan classrooms had a highly cyclical and repetitive element, exposing the children multiple times to the same words and phrases, allowing them to build their understanding and vocabulary of Occitan and allowing them to become familiar with the sounds and pronunciation of the words, whereas for the older children this often took the form of poetry recital, a feature of the French education system².

These activities also served a further purpose and that was to strengthen the children’s social knowledge of the Occitan culture (Mello, 2001). The emphasis on Occitan culture

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36500648>

and heritage came through very strongly in all the classes that I observed. Children are introduced to Occitan culture through songs, dance, and poetry from an early age and throughout primary school they collect these in a separate folder (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Example of Occitan poem for the early years

The *école maternelle* that I visited was a very clear example of how the cultural and linguistic elements were blended into the learning and teaching activities. In the morning the children started with a story about a cat in search of milk. This introduced the children to the names of (farm) animals, the sounds they make and the agricultural cycle (milk comes from cows, cows eat hay, hay comes from dried grass, the grass is dried after the farmer cuts it, the farmer cuts it after the grass has grown with the help of the sun and the rain) – a very important feature of traditional Occitan life. There was a high level of repetition of vocabulary in the story, helping to reinforce the vocabulary and the grammatical structures introduced (Yeung et al., 2020).

The story telling activity was then followed by a music and dance session with children practising the traditional songs and dance performed at the festival in the village. Silvia Ortega, the Occitan medium teacher of the *école maternelle*, explained that this emphasis on Occitan heritage was aimed to foster a sense of identity and understanding of the culture, a view supported by Churchill (2002). All the teachers I spoke to recognised the need to create a clear distinction between “French culture” and “Occitan culture” through what Fishman (1991) calls ‘prior ideological clarification’, an understanding of why they are learning Occitan and what makes it different and unique from the majority language (in this case French).

In the case of Occitan this was particularly pertinent as French and Occitan are *Ausbau* languages (Kloss, 1967, Kloss, 1993), meaning that the languages share the same linguistic features and belong to the same language family. This makes Occitan (relatively) easy to learn and comprehend for speakers of French and Spanish, especially compared to *Abstand* languages (such as Gaelic and English) where there are no overlapping linguistic features. It was clear from my observations that all the Occitan immersion teachers actively used these similarities in their teaching and learning approaches, with children being encouraged to explore the similarities and differences as part of their Occitan language acquisition (see Figure 2).

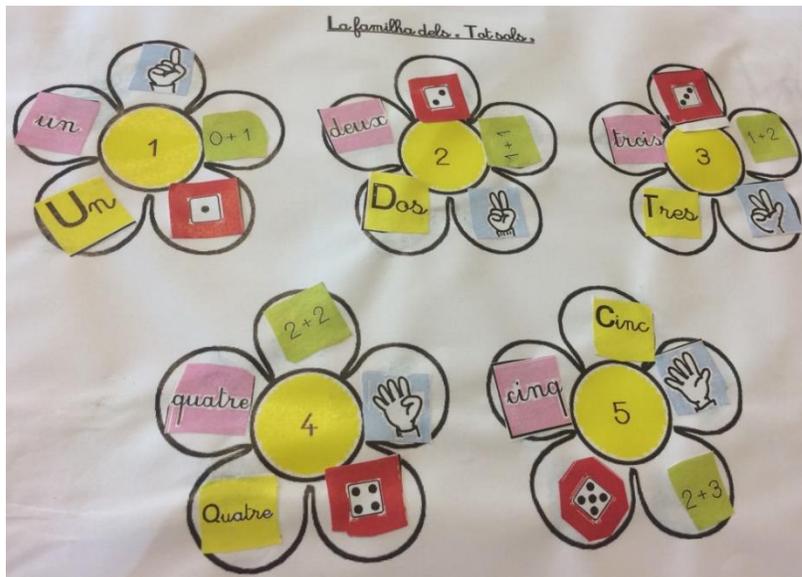


Figure 2: developing metalinguistic skills through numeracy

Comparisons with GME in Scotland

Both Occitan and Gaelic have featured as a medium of instruction in primary classrooms for a similar period, and have faced, and are facing, similar challenges in terms of teacher recruitment and the availability of resources and authentic materials for teaching and learning, and both models have an overt aim to ensure that the children are bilingual in French and Occitan and Gaelic and English respectively. However, the way this is conceptualised in the classroom is very different, with Gaelic, unlike Occitan, recognised by the authorities as an official language of Scotland 'commanding equal respect to English in Scotland' (Scottish Parliament, 2005). Although the provision of the act, as argued by McLeod (2014), is relatively weak, and does not create rights for speakers to use the language or for children to be educated through the medium of Gaelic, it did create Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the Gaelic language board, which became responsible not only for the promotion of the Gaelic language and culture but also for the growth and development of Gaelic (medium) education.

This different socio-political context means that unlike the French immersion model which is based on a 50/50 split in teaching time between French and Occitan, the use of Gaelic across the seven years of primary school will typically be higher, consisting of two

phases: ‘the early stages of learning through the medium of Gaelic and where no other language is used, is referred to as total immersion. The next phase – where the development of the other language (English) is introduced – is referred to as immersion but with all the curriculum continuing to be delivered through the medium of Gaelic’ (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (Scotland), 2011). This means that throughout the seven years of primary education, the majority of the teaching and learning will take place through the medium of Gaelic, although the extent to which English is included in the upper stages of primary school can vary (O’Hanlon, 2010).

The exposure of children to the Gaelic language in the primary education system is, therefore, significantly greater than that of their peers in Occitan immersion settings, but despite this increased input teachers still face similar challenges to their colleagues in the Occitan medium classroom, namely how to support children in the acquisition of a minority language where this is not the language of the home, the family and the community, and, in the majority of cases, the wider school setting. Whereas in the Occitan contexts the acquisition of new vocabulary and even grammatical structures might be supported by the similarities between the two languages, this is not the case for Gaelic, where the grammatical constructs and vocabulary are significantly different from English. This means that GME teachers need to develop different strategies to support metalinguistic awareness, and ensure that children acquire the correct grammatical features, especially those which are significantly different from English, with teachers across GME only more recently starting to use a direct approach to correcting errors in grammar and pronunciation (Macleod et al., 2014), with McPake et al. (2017)

Furthermore, whereas in France Occitan is considered a regional language, with clear geographical links to local and cultural heritage in traditions, in Scotland the discourse around Gaelic is more complex. Although the highest proportion of Gaelic speakers live in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Mac an Tàilleir, 2010), Gaelic in Scotland is not geographically bounded by local authority or area, with GME available in 14 local authorities across Scotland (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2020), resulting in what Stephen et al. (2011) have termed ‘cultural dislocation and assimilation’ (p. 15). This means that the inclusion of Gaelic in the education system needs to carefully consider the varying local contexts to allow children to create meaningful and relevant links between the language and the cultural traditions, even in those areas which are not traditionally associated with the language (Oliver, 2010).

This raises questions of how ‘Gaelic’ GME is, with Stephen et al. (2011) identifying that ‘Gaelic education has tended to present a culture offer and not a merely linguistic one; children are given the opportunity to engage with ‘Gaelic culture’ [but] the meaning of the terms ‘culture’ generally and ‘Gaelic culture’ more specifically is rarely explored’ although it is typically focussed ‘on the artistic aspects of culture, especially song and music’ , for example participation in the Mòd³, a traditional Gaelic festival including

³ <https://www.ancomunn.co.uk/nationalmod>

song, music, dancing, drama, sport, and literature, or the Fèisean⁴, community-based arts tuition. As identified by Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998), there is a danger for Gaelic, as there is for Occitan, that a focus on performance and outward manifestations of “the culture”, including song and dance will create a “success experience” for the teachers and the children, but do not necessarily result in language acquisition (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, 1998). Smith-Christmas (2016), for example, in her study of a bilingual Gaelic / English family, has found that these opportunities have resulted in children increasingly treating Gaelic as a performance language rather a language for communication, a finding supported by Dunmore (2019) who found that only around 20% of those educated through the medium of Gaelic continued to use the language as an adult.

Reflections and lessons

Both the Occitan and Gaelic languages face similar challenges in terms of their long-term survival. The education system is an important mechanism for language acquisition, with the overall language aim of both contexts that children become proficient in both the majority language of the community as well as the minority language. However, in addition to the way the model is conceptualised, there are some differences between the two contexts which might affect the overall outcomes in terms of the long-term survival of the languages, both linguistically and socio-politically.

The close linguistic proximity of Occitan to French (and Spanish) means that teachers can use the children’s existing meta-linguistic awareness of French to support the acquisition of Occitan. Many of the direct language teaching inputs focus on actively exploring the differences and similarities, with a clear focus on ensuring that the differences in grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation are understood by the children. In Scotland, because Gaelic and English are *Abstand* languages, this has resulted in a different approach, with the premise that ‘children will quickly acquire the target language (Gaelic)’ if they are placed in an environment in which the target language is used exclusively’ (Pollock, 2010), with less emphasis on formal teaching of language and grammar.

A further important difference is the link between the language and the culture. Occitan, and in particular each dialect, is geographically bounded to a specific region, with its own cultural traditions, and these are overtly included in the teaching and learning process, primarily to set Occitan apart from the dominant majority culture and language, exactly for the same reason that facilitates the learning of Occitan, namely its proximity to French. In GME classrooms this link between language and culture is less overtly present and promoted, with a reliance on stories or nursery rhymes translated from English (Stephen et al., 2016) and which are typically based on British or Scottish-English cultural traditions and stories. This, conversely, might precisely be as a result of the Gaelic Language Act and the promotion of Gaelic ‘as an official language of Scotland’

⁴ <https://www.feisean.org/en/>

(Scottish Parliament, 2005), and the inclusive approach towards GME as not belonging to one particular group or geographical location.

This might, however, be about to change once the revised General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) Professional Standards for teachers come into effect in August 2021. These revised professional standards, for the first time, explicitly refer to Gaelic Medium and the need to ‘demonstrate a depth of knowledge and understanding of ... the distinctive culture, context and ethos of the learning community including Gaelic medium ethos where appropriate’ (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021). This, therefore, opens the opportunity to consider and debate the role of Gaelic culture in education, and what an authentic Gaelic ethos and culture might look like in the different contexts and locations across Scotland where GME is available.

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