

*“Absolutely nothing is so important for a nation’s culture as its language” (Wilhelm von Humbolt): The Cornish Language in Formal Education*

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Cornish is the vernacular language of Cornwall in the far South-West of Great Britain. It is currently taught through adult education and a correspondence course but has a limited position within formal and compulsory educational settings. What needs to occur for the language to gain a greater presence in schools, further and higher education? This paper discusses the current position of the language and issues for the language community to consider.

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This paper considers the history, current position and aims for the future of the Cornish language in formal education. Studies of the history of the language in education, notably include that of MacKinnon for the Government Office of the South-West, and Sayers et al for the European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning.<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand has examined public views on the status of the language in education in the twenty-first century, and Cornwall Council produces both five-year strategic and annual operational plans.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper is to address the current presence of Cornish in formal educational settings and whether this could be increased.

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<sup>1</sup>Ken MacKinnon, *Cornish Language Study*. (Government Office for the South-West, 2000). Dave Sayers, Merryn Davies-Deacon, and Sarah Croome, *The Cornish Language in Education in the UK*. (Mercator: European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Siarl Ferdinand, ‘Introducing Cornish in education,’ (2020), DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14807.29609, [accessed 21 February 2021].

The Cornish revival dates from the publication of Jenner’s ‘Handbook of the Cornish Language’ (1904).<sup>3</sup> Classes were established in Cornwall and London, and key figures such as Robert Morton Nance and ASD Smith began producing teaching materials.<sup>4</sup> In 1967 the Cornish Language Board was established.<sup>5</sup> This undertook the examination of Cornish at three levels, the highest at a level just above O Level.<sup>6</sup> By the 1980s there were around twenty adult classes in Cornwall, the correspondence course *Kernewek Dre Lyther* had been established, and examination results reflected increasing numbers of proficient speakers. In 1989 examinations were extended to a fourth grade equivalent to A level teaching and by 2000, the number of classes had risen to thirty-six.<sup>7</sup> In 2019 eighty-two candidates took these examinations across the four grades.<sup>8</sup>

Particular families involved in the language movement brought up their children speaking Cornish at home, however momentum within the educational establishment to support these initiatives was limited. In 1979 the organisation *Dalleth* (Beginning) was founded to support such efforts, and those families known to be bringing up their children as bilingual, and in 1980 a children’s magazine, *Len ha Lyw* (Read and Colour) was introduced.<sup>9</sup> The *Movyans Skolyow Meythrin* (Nursery School movement), established the *Skol dy-Sadorn Kernewek* at Cornwall College in Pool in 2010, providing a Saturday morning session for children aged two to five and child-based Cornish lessons for parents. In 2017 the *Skol Veythrin Kerenza* became an Ofsted-registered fully Cornish-medium day care centre for children up to eight, and a new setting was due to open at Easter 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Before the 1980s, Cornish was reportedly taught in a handful of schools. A 1984 state of the language report found it was being taught in seven primary, and two secondary schools.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of the National Curriculum confined any Cornish language provision to lunchtime and after school clubs, and this was reliant on either volunteer provision, or a keen teacher either able to speak Cornish or use the resources available. The Cornish Language Partnership, *MAGA*, run by Cornwall Council, sent three language learning packs to all primary schools across Cornwall, and in 2012, their two part-time Education Officers worked

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Beresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and its Literature*. (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd, 1974), p. 153.

<sup>4</sup>Dee Harris, *The Cornish History Notebook*. (Pool: An Kylgh Kernewek and Ors Sempel, 2016), p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>Sayers et al., *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>Mackinnon, *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup>Kesva An Taves Kernewek. *Derivas Blydhenyek 2019/ Annual Report 2019*. (Truro: Kesva an Taves Kernewek, 2020), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Mackinnon, *Op. cit.* p. 21.

<sup>10</sup>Esther Johns, Personal correspondence, 16th April 2020.

<sup>11</sup>Mackinnon, *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

with around twenty schools.<sup>12</sup> MAGA also delivered training to teachers, providing teaching materials and some taster sessions, usually in the form of workshops. Since 2016, the company Golden Tree has been contracted to develop and support the teaching, learning and use of Cornish. Their task was to embed Cornish as a language across a core group of primary schools, rising from five to fifty within a five-year period.<sup>13</sup> In 2019 this programme ran at eighteen schools in Penzance and Liskeard. For Cornish to succeed at primary level it needs both the support of Headteachers and a teacher who is either able to speak Cornish, or to run the sessions, and in 2020 Golden Tree decided to switch their focus to supporting Cornish within those schools which already offer it. As yet, Cornish does not have enough of a stronghold within the primary system in Cornwall either within curriculum time, or as part of a club, due to inadequate manpower provision, but if school staff become more willing and confident to deliver the language, and less reliant on outside providers, this should continue to grow. A key marker as to the success of Cornish in primary schools will be the acceptance of Cornish as a language in terms of adherence to the National Curriculum as “teaching may be of any modern or ancient foreign language.”<sup>14</sup>

It was possible to study Cornish GCSE until 1996, when a total of forty-two candidates took the examination, however the examination was no longer commercially viable and it was scrapped.<sup>15</sup> In 2000 Cornish was being taught at four secondary schools as part of a club, but as with the primary curriculum, finding space for Cornish within the secondary curriculum is all but impossible.<sup>16</sup> Within the National Curriculum, the teaching of a modern foreign language is compulsory to the age of fourteen, with the proviso that this provide the basis for further study.<sup>17</sup> How, therefore, do we define Cornish within these parameters? The provision of Cornish at secondary level would require a vast increase in resources and teacher training, both of which are currently heavily reliant on the voluntary sector within Cornish adult education.<sup>18</sup> For Cornish to succeed within the state education system, it requires status, a place within the school day, properly resourced and paid peripatetic teachers, or resources and retraining for existing teachers within schools. For Cornish to be attractive to both students and teachers at a secondary level it needs to have a purpose beyond the classroom, creating

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<sup>12</sup>Sayers et al., Op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>14</sup>Department for Education. *Languages Programme of Study: Key Stage 2. National Curriculum in England*. (London:DFE-00174-2013, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Mackinnon, Op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Department for Education. *Languages Programme of Study: Key Stage 3. National Curriculum in England*. (London: DFE-00195-2013, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Mark Trevethan, *Strateji an yeth Kernewek Towl Oberansek 2017/18 – Derivas Penn an vledhen/ Cornish Language Strategy Operational Plan 2017/18 – End of Year Plan*. (Truro: Cornwall County Council, 2018), p. 4.

opportunities for either examination success or through becoming a requirement for further use beyond secondary education – within higher education or the workplace.

In 2018, the Welsh examination board, WJEC, introduced entry level and level one examinations in Cornish. These are pre-GCSE level qualifications also offered in other languages. These examinations were taken in 2019 by a pilot group of students attending Cornish adult education classes, twenty-six at entry level, and four at level one.<sup>19</sup> Examinations were put on hold in 2020, but the hope is that further students will sit these and that the level two Cornish qualification will be developed. Although this work is co-ordinated by the Cornish Language Office of Cornwall Council, the successor to MAGA, the development of teaching and exam materials, and the teaching of adult education classes, is all carried out by volunteers. Most teachers are language Bards of the Cornish Gorsedh, thus have passed the highest level of the Cornish language board examinations, and many are current, or former teachers, although not necessarily in languages.

2020 witnessed a concerted effort to support those teaching Cornish within adult education, by providing training, especially in online teaching, and in the production of high quality, modern resources which have been made freely available.<sup>20</sup> The legacy of the language revival is that many of the teaching books and resources were produced by people lacking pedagogical training in languages, based on their remembrance of the language teaching they themselves received at school, therefore it is highly skewed towards the teaching of grammar, and does not take into account more recent developments in the teaching of languages, including the teaching of listening and speaking skills and the use of modern technologies.

What then, for the future of Cornish in formal education? Alongside the efforts currently underway to modernise and professionalise the teaching of Cornish in adult education, the availability of the language at the pre-school level and some availability at primary level, the language movement needs to consider what benefits it can offer to secondary, further and higher education. If the number of candidates taking the WJEC examinations continue to rise, a new GCSE might be possible, which in turn could lead to A Level provision. This could be an attractive proposition to adult learners as well as schools, however the availability of teachers capable of teaching at these levels, and quality educational resources remains an issue. None of these issues will be resolved overnight. Whereas adults do learn new subjects as a hobby, students in formal educational settings do not have the leisure time to study a subject just for the fun of it, their qualifications need to provide a positive outcome for their

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<sup>19</sup>Mark Trevethan, *Strateji an yeth Kernewek Towl Oberansek 2019/20 – Derivas Penn an vledhen/ Cornish Language Strategy Operational Plan 2097/20 – End of Year Plan*. (Truro: Cornwall County Council, 2020), p. 8.

<sup>20</sup>Cornish Language Board, *Kesva an Taves Kernewek*, <<https://kesva.org/learning>>, [accessed 22 February 2021].

future educational or employment plans. Where Cornish could be introduced as a subject worthy of academic study is at tertiary level, where Celtic Studies and languages have a long academic tradition. Successful introduction of a subject at university level makes it attractive at secondary level. Here, once more, the issue of sourcing people able to teach the language and access to appropriate resources is key, combined with the necessity for any such provision to be economically viable for the institution. Perhaps one way for Cornish to be introduced within Higher Education is to examine the possibility of cross-institution partnerships with the aim of providing teaching in Cornish to Celtic Studies students at several institutions. This approach could not only provide a large enough cohort of students to make such a course economically viable, but such collaborations might be able to attract funding.

The teaching of Cornish within adult education has seen a growth in numbers since the necessary shift to online teaching brought about by the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup> This growth, combined with increased teacher training, the production of new appropriate resources and the increased use of technology indicate the language is well-placed to make the shift to formal educational settings if the demand can be created to make it a viable proposition for both students and institutions.

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<sup>21</sup> Kesva An Taves Kernewek. *Annual General Meeting February 2021*. Minutes to be published.

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