

## Chapter 2

# Critical Language Pedagogy in Scotland: The Case of Gaelic Medium Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Critical language pedagogy involves addressing the relationships between power, identity, language, and education. In recent decades, there has been an increase in the understanding of the importance of language revitalization, and many minority and endangered language groups are choosing to teach through the medium of non-dominant languages. This qualitative study looks at the role of critical language pedagogy of teachers within the Gaelic Medium Education (GME) system of schooling in Scotland. Following a phenomenological approach, the researcher interviewed three GME teachers about their backgrounds and experiences. Using closed-coding and critical discourse analysis (CDA), a number of themes emerged. All three participants, despite having had limited formal education in the areas of second language acquisition and critical theory, demonstrated an understanding of critical language pedagogy. With GME seeing an increase in enrollment, there is still much to be done in teacher education in Scotland with regard to critical consciousness.*

### INTRODUCTION

Scotland is home to three autochthonous languages: Scottish Gaelic, Scots, and Scottish English. Scottish Gaelic, or Gaelic, is an endangered language with fewer than 60,000 speakers. Although Gaelic is Indigenous to Scotland, British Standard English has been the default medium of formal education throughout the country for several centuries (Melchers, Shaw, & Sundkvist, 2019). Nevertheless, Scotland has been part of a recent global movement aimed at including endangered, minority, and lesser-used languages in school curriculum (e.g., Wright, Boun, & García, 2017). One of Scotland's bilingual education initiatives is known as Gaelic Medium Education (GME) and involves teaching all school

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subjects through the medium of Gaelic. Murray and Morrison (1984) explain that the GME movement, founded in the early 1980s, was implemented “to produce Gaelic/English bilinguals with a mastery of . . . both languages together with an appreciation of the nuances, emotional overtones and cultural dimensions of the two languages” (p. 16) as well as “instill in the pupils a much-needed sense of identity and confidence in themselves as people . . . and foster in them an interest in and a sympathy with the affairs of the own locality” (p. 91).

These GME schools have existed in Scotland for nearly four decades and have spread throughout the country. Although originally founded in the Highlands and Hebrides Islands region of Scotland, they can now be found in the Lowland regions and even in urban centers. A great deal of research has been conducted with regard to GME. Some of this research has focused on Scottish Gaelic learners (e.g., MacCaluim, 2007), some on language change happening in GME contexts (e.g., Nance, 2015), and some on the tensions that exist between “outsider” (i.e., non-Gaelic speaking) researchers and insiders (i.e., those from the Gàidhealtachd, or Gaelic speaking community) (e.g., Mitchell, 1992; Murray & Morrison, 1984). As GME is at the heart of the language’s recent popularity and the language continues to gain support of European government bodies (Dunbar, 2006) as well as many policy makers within the Scotland (Hutchison & Wilson, 2019), there is a continued need to understand the role that GME teachers play in the promotion and teaching of the language.

This chapter explores the experiences of three GME teachers throughout Scotland with specific attention to their understanding of critical pedagogy and second language acquisition. As GME teachers promulgate language and culture ideologies of Gaelic, it is important to understand their perceptions about the language and their lived experiences as GME teachers. In what ways do they see connections between language, power, identity, and education? Do they exhibit signs of critical consciousness (i.e., conscientization) (Freire, 1975)? As Gaelic is an endangered language, GME could play a pivotal role in promotion of the language and understanding of the sociocultural causes of its deterioration. Many seeking GME for their children do not speak Gaelic as a mother tongue, but see other benefits of Gaelic language learning (e.g., social and economic capital, cultural ties, cognitive development) (Brooks, 2019; McLeod & O’ Rourke, 2015; Knipe, 2017). In what ways do GME teachers understand current trends in second language acquisition theory in order to be able to adjust for such changes? The two main research questions that guided this qualitative study were as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of Gaelic medium teachers about their own instruction?
2. In what ways do they engage in critical language pedagogy?

## **LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF SCOTLAND**

While there are a number of languages spoken throughout the United Kingdom, and indeed many immigrant communities in Scotland specifically, scholars usually regard Scottish English, a variety of English that developed from language contact, Scots, sometimes called *Doric* or *Lallans*, and Scottish Gaelic, or simply *Gaelic*, to be Indigenous to the region (Dunbar, 2006; Jones, 2002; Kay, 1998, 2006; Ó Néill, 2005). Scots and Gaelic, or Gàidhlig as it is called in the language itself, are minority autochthonous (i.e., Indigenous) languages with rich histories in Scotland.

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