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LANGUAGE POLICY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM: KEY DIMENSIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Language policy is a crucial element of any modern state's governance, shaping the status and use of languages within its borders. The United Kingdom, often perceived as a monolingual English-speaking country, in fact possesses a complex and multifaceted language policy landscape. Contrary to popular belief, the UK has developed an extensive body of legislation related to language – encompassing not only English but also a range of indigenous, community, and sign languages. The present study aims to examine the key features of UK language policy, to identify its principal domains of application, and to evaluate the challenges it faces in the contemporary multilingual context.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the structure and scope of language legislation in the United Kingdom, to examine the statutory frameworks governing indigenous, community, and modern languages across the four devolved nations, and to identify key misconceptions surrounding UK language policy. The study further seeks to assess the implications of current policy for language education and social inclusion.

A comprehensive corpus analysis of UK primary and secondary legislation from 1918 to 2021 reveals a striking finding: the UK contains 1,501 pieces of language-related legislation across 21 policy domains – far exceeding common expectations. However, over 90% of this legislation is classified as “hidden”, meaning it is embedded within laws primarily concerned with other subjects. This concealment significantly impedes the development of a coherent national language strategy and risks important language provisions being overlooked by policymakers and the public alike [1].

A second major finding challenges the widespread assumption that UK language policy focuses primarily on modern foreign languages (MFL). In reality, legislation concerning indigenous languages – including Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Ulster Scots, Scots, Cornish, Manx, and British Sign Language – outnumbers MFL legislation by more than seven to one. Welsh and Gaelic are the most extensively legislated: the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 establish the equal status of Welsh and English in the public sector in Wales, while the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 provided Scottish Gaelic with its first statutory basis. The British Sign Language Act 2022 marked a landmark achievement by recognising BSL as an official language of England, Scotland, and Wales, with a GCSE in BSL to be introduced in schools from September 2025 [1, 2].

In Northern Ireland, language policy remains politically sensitive, particularly with respect to the Irish language, historically associated with the Catholic and nationalist community. Nevertheless, both the Irish Language Strategy 2015–35 and the Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy 2015–35 were introduced to safeguard these languages, with commitments further embedded in amendments to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 following the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 [2].

A third misconception is that language policy is confined to the Education domain. Whilst education does contain significant language legislation – including requirements for MFL teaching at Key Stages 2 and 3 – language provisions have been identified across 21 domains, including Public health and safety, Law and crime, Media, and Nationality and citizenship. For instance, the Juvenile Justice Centre Rules (Northern Ireland) 2008 require the provision of interpretation services for non-English-speaking children in custody, while health regulations require institutions to consider the linguistic backgrounds of patients [1].

In the sphere of language education, divergence across the four nations has intensified since devolution in 1998. Scotland has implemented a 1+2 language policy since 2012, entitling every child to learn a second language from age 5 and a third during primary school. Wales is pursuing a bold goal of one million Welsh speakers by 2050, with its 2022 curriculum integrating English, Welsh, and an international language. England retains statutory requirements for languages at KS2 and KS3, supported by mechanisms such as the EBacc, yet faces a serious decline in take-up, particularly at A-level: French entries fell by 9.7%, German by 19.8%, and Spanish by 4.5% compared to 2019. Northern Ireland remains the only jurisdiction with no statutory language provision at primary level – the shortest language education requirement in Europe [3].

Concerns about equity and access to language learning are equally pressing. Research consistently demonstrates that independent schools provide significantly greater language learning opportunities than state schools. Schools with higher proportions of pupils eligible for Free School Meals or Pupil Premium record the lowest uptake of languages at KS4. Furthermore, the concentration of language degree provision in research-intensive universities has created geographical and socioeconomic “cold spots”, limiting access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority ethnic groups [3].

In conclusion, UK language policy is far more extensive than commonly assumed, yet its “hidden” character, legislative fragmentation, and lack of coordination across devolved administrations hinder the development of a coherent national strategy. Greater cross-government and cross-jurisdictional collaboration is essential. Policymakers and civil servants would benefit from systematic training to recognise language dimensions within their portfolios. Future research should focus on how existing hidden language policies are implemented in practice, with particular attention to hedging language and vague formulations that risk undermining consistent application. Ensuring equitable access to language learning across

socioeconomic and regional divides remains a central challenge for UK language policy in the twenty-first century.

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