

# Language in the Primary School

An INTO Discussion Document

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# Foreword

Language has always held a central place in the primary curriculum and since the foundation of the State, both English, the mother tongue of the majority, and Irish, have been taught to all pupils. English is also a global language, which creates particular challenges for us in terms of learning other modern languages.

However, in discussing languages in the primary school – we are not just talking about ethnic tongues like Irish, English or European languages – we are also talking about a universal human language in the sense of a system for making and communicating meaning in art, music, literature and drama. Language is not simply a conduit for thought, a vehicle on which we place our thoughts and express it down the lines to somebody else, for in the act of making language we actually make our thoughts and when we make our thoughts we make ourselves. In other words, we create and recreate. Language should be for the purpose of creation and recreation. The mental process that makes creativity possible is imagination. In the context of the current preoccupation with aims and objectives, targets, profiles, components, paperwork, and a preoccupation with writing things down, it's vital to concentrate on developing the imagination and on restoring of awe and wonder into teaching. For it is as Eisner says;

*“through the imagination that the future is envisaged, recall will tell children, young children, what was but imagination will enable them to conceive what might be. Recall conserves, imagination liberates. Imagination is the explorer of new possibilities, the engine of progress and art, literature, science, business, all even our personal relationships, imagination is important.” Imagination is critical and very important for leading a rich life. Its cultivation should not become a luxury as the emphasis shifts on to paperwork, targets and increasing workloads.”*

Language teaching has a number of dimensions, which include the development of oral expression, written skills, literature, and creativity. All are part of the language curriculum in our schools. Our aim in primary schools is to encourage and assist pupils to use language fluently and freely and to express their ideas clearly. We teach children to read both for information and for pleasure. We seek to provide learning support or resource teaching for children who have difficulties. There are, of course, particular challenges for teachers in primary schools in relation to the implementation of the revised curriculum in English and Gaelige, as is illustrated in the research work carried out by the INTO Education Committee. Sign language, a further dimension of

language in schools, has not been considered in this particular report.

In recent years, we face the additional challenge that an increasing number of our pupils do not have English or Irish as a mother tongue. Teaching English as a second language to non-national pupils is new for many of us. Whereas language-support teachers have the main responsibility for devising language learning programmes, the inclusion of children with little English is a challenge many class teachers face today. Integrate Ireland Language and Teaching, (IILT), based in Trinity College, has been a great support for teachers in terms of developing a suitable programme, suitable materials, and in providing professional development for teachers. The survey carried out by the Education Committee has highlighted further issues that need to be dealt with, particularly the need to professionalize the support service.

A decision to introduce modern languages in the primary school can only take place in the context of an overall policy on language and education. There is no doubt that the initial evaluation of the pilot project has shown the teaching of modern languages to be successful, but it is early days yet, and there are many questions to be answered.

D'fhéadfaí a rá freisin go bhfuil gá dul i ngleic le coincheap an dátheangachais nó an ilteangachais i gcomhthéacs na hÉireann. Cé go bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar mháthairtheanga ag pobal áirithe sa tír, is mar theanga bhreise a fhoghlaimíonn formhór an phobail an teanga. Cad é an sórt polasaí teanga is ceart a bheith againn sa tír, nó sa chóras oideachais féin, a thabharfaidh a ceart féin don Ghaeilge, a thabharfaidh deis d'eachtrannaigh teanga an phobail a fhoghlaim, a thabharfaidh áit do thea gacha iasachta, agus a chuireann béim ar fhorbairt na máthairtheanga do gach saoránach?

This report is in three parts. **Part One** contains a discussion paper on language in the primary school which formed the background paper at the Consultative Conference on Education which took place in Letterkenny in November 2003. This section includes a report on the research carried out by the Education Committee. **Part Two** contains the proceedings of the conference. This section includes the presentations of the Education Committee in relation to Language in the Curriculum in addition to the guest presentations. Dr Muiris Ó Laoire's paper on policy and practice concerning language in education contains some interesting thoughts that warrant serious reflection by both teachers and policy makers. Anita Robinson's paper, which was superbly delivered at the conference, tells us of the power of story. It reminds us of the importance of wonder and imagination. Brian McMahon exhorted in *The Master* that it is important for teachers to identify what will preserve a sense of wonder in young children. As Brian McMahon said, the average child is on a voyage of discovery, intent on creating a new world for him/herself. The power of story often unlocks the door of his/her imagination leading him/her forward to the delights of the learning process, and this was well illustrated by Anita in her presentation. A collated report of the discussions groups is included in this section.

Finally in **Part Three** the main arguments and findings arising in Parts One and Two are summarised.

I would like, on behalf of the Organization, to thank our guest contributors, Dr Muiris Ó Laoire and Anita Robinson, whose papers have enriched this report. I would also like to thank members of the Education Committee who carried out the research, prepared the discussion paper and presented at the conference. A special thanks to Paul Brennan, who played a major role in writing and editing this report, and who has recently retired from the Education Committee, having been a member, since its foundation in 1968. The Organization also appreciates the work of the INTO publication team under the direction of Lori Kealy, and the contribution of Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official, who had responsibility for compiling and editing the report.

It is hoped that this report will contribute to the current debate on the place of language in our educational system.

John Carr, MA (Ed)  
General Secretary

October 2004



# Part One

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## **DISCUSSION PAPER ON LANGUAGE IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**Introduction**

**Chapter 1: English in the Primary School**

**Chapter 2: Second Language Learning in the Irish Context**

**Chapter 3: An Ghaeilge sa Bhunscoil**

**Chapter 4: English Language Support Service for Non National Pupils**

**Chapter 5: Modern Languages in Primary Education**



# Introduction

The *raison d'être* for this document, *Language in the Primary School*, lies in the importance of language in the process of education and development. Early learning (and the Primary School Curriculum avers that learning begins before birth) is based on sensory experience. There is a growing body of evidence that children begin to form concepts at an early age. This is based directly on a range of interactive sensory experience. The rate and extent of children's learning in the early years is greater than at any other period in life. One of the most impressive features of this range of learning is the extraordinary amount of language a child acquires during the first three and a half to four years. By the time a child has reached this age s/he will have not only acquired an impressive vocabulary but will have mastered the grammar and syntax of the mother language. The child will still make 'grammatical errors'. A three-year-old may very well say "the dog runned after me," but will be giving unquestioned evidence that s/he has mastered the inflection for the past tense. The fact that the verb in question is irregular and has been misused in no way gainsays this mastery.

The question as to how children learn so much of the mother tongue in such a short time has exercised psychologists, linguists and educationalists, and has resulted in a number of theories. However, the consensus at the moment, if such exists in a field as contested as this, would seem to lean towards the model proposed by Noam Chomsky. He would claim that the human brain has an innate capacity for language learning. He argues that the mastery of language a child achieves by the age of three and a half or four years cannot be explained in terms of imitation or teaching, whether that is formal or informal. Both imitation and teaching play a role. However, in the absence of an innate language ability, they could not on their own result in the level of language that children acquire, coming as they do from backgrounds that offer widely disparate social and cultural experience, and bringing with them into the world a wide range of natural ability and intelligence.

There is another important factor to be taken into account when considering language learning. Language has a basic function of communication, whether with oneself or, perhaps more importantly, with others. The use of language is a social act, whether that involves listening and communicating with oneself, communicating information, an idea, or an opinion to others, or responding to the ideas, opinions or information of others. This interactive context and function of language is of immense significance both in learning and in language learning, and particularly so in

the early years. The ability of the young child to form concepts prior to any significant degree of language acquisition has already been referred to. However, as language develops the child acquires the means of using symbols to represent concepts. The accuracy and comprehensiveness of the concept will, of course, depend on broader experience, but the symbol can now represent a variety of characteristics and dimensions that add up to the concept. The word cow represents the concept of a particular animal. A veterinary surgeon's concept of a cow will differ from a cowboy's and differ still more from that of a four-year-old child, but all can share a common concept of a cow that will be quite distinct from that of a horse, for example.

In this lies one of the central functions of language in learning. Concept formation will originate ultimately in sensory experience, but as language is acquired the child is no longer dependent solely on sensory experience for further concept development. Experience will and should play a continuing role in concept formation, but as the child matures language will not only play an ever more important role but will afford the child the means of expanding existing concepts and developing new concepts that not only outstrips the capacity of direct experience but adds to it exponentially. Words gain new connotations, are linked with other words, are combined to form new concepts, and help to make abstraction more manageable and communicable.

Language use and language interaction are crucial to this process, not just in the early years but throughout the child's experience in primary school. Even if we accept Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar, which has been described both as the basic design underlying the grammars of all languages and the circuitry in children's brains that allows them to learn the grammar of their parents' language, language development will not occur unless it is activated through language use and language interaction. Here again the importance of children's experience of language interaction in the home and in school is paramount, and the quality of that language interaction will have far-reaching effects in terms of both language learning and learning generally.

This has obvious implications for the issues dealt with in this document, but in particular for the development of literacy, the relationship between language development and educational disadvantage, the role of language development in catering for children with special needs, and the role of parents in learning and in language learning.

A particularly important feature of language learning is the development of literacy. The ability to read and comprehend text is central to success in current and future education and to an ability to function effectively in modern society. Successive national and international surveys have raised questions in relation to the levels of literacy being achieved through the Irish educational system, although the results of the PISA 2000 study have been more encouraging. However, it is important to bear in mind that all of these studies refer to the literacy attainments of children who experienced approaches to the teaching of emergent reading and reading that were

current prior to the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum. Central features of English in that curriculum are the approaches it espouses to the acquisition of literacy, the comprehension of text, and how children should respond to text.

Following a programme of in-service education developed and organised by the Primary Curriculum Support Service, the implementation of the English curriculum began in the school year 2000–2001. The success or otherwise of the new approaches to the teaching of emergent reading and reading will not be obvious until the results of successive national surveys of the reading attainment of pupils in fifth class are available. These are conducted every five years or so. The report of the next survey is due in 2004, and this may provide some very limited evidence of the success of the new approaches in improving reading attainment levels. The national survey that follows this one will prove more conclusive, since the cohort of children tested will have experienced the new approaches to reading throughout their primary schooling.

Whatever results these surveys yield, they will be contingent on the extent to which the new approaches to emergent reading and reading are being implemented in schools, and the surveys will not address this issue directly. Valid evidence in this regard can only be gained through a programme of monitoring and review of curriculum and curriculum implementation, which is a function of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). However, in order to acquire some initial evidence in relation to the extent to which the English curriculum is being implemented the INTO Education Committee conducted some focus group research with teachers in various locations throughout the country. A description of this research and an analysis of its outcomes are given in Chapter 1.

A distinctive issue for primary school teachers in addressing children's language development in the mother tongue is the relationship between language and disadvantage. In the early 1960s, Basil Bernstein, a British sociologist, became well known for his view that the relationship between school performance and socio-economic background could be explained in terms of variations in the forms of language found in different social classes [Bernstein, 1960, 1964 and 1970]. He is best known for coining the terms 'elaborated code' and 'restricted code' in relation to the way language is used and structured in different social groups.

In Bernstein's view children from working class homes use a restricted code of language which is likely to frame what is being said in such a way that listeners must be aware of, or share, the physical situations of the speakers in order to understand what they mean. In contrast, children from better off homes tend to use an elaborated code, which uses language in a way in which the thing being referred to is first established verbally. Bernstein believed that children who are fluent in the elaborate code come to school prepared for the linguistic demands they will encounter in school while children who use the restricted code are likely to find learning relatively difficult.

Bernstein's theory was embraced by educators and politicians in the USA and used as a stimulus for political action to provide educational opportunities for children from poor homes. The 'Head Start' (1965) pre-school programme, for instance, was launched by President Johnson for, in his own words, "five-and six-year old children who are the inheritors of poverty's curse". It is worth noting that in the same speech President Johnson expressed the belief that many poor children, especially black ones, were exposed to a dialect that resulted in their being able to understand and say very little or indeed, in their not being able to talk at all. This opinion came from studies which concluded, like Bereiter and Englemann (1966) that:

*"... the speech of severely deprived children seems to consist not of distinct words, as does the speech of middle class children of the same age, but rather of whole phrases or sentences that function like giant words."*

The notion that the non-standard dialects (such as those of culturally deprived black American children) are grammatically deficient would now be considered by many linguists as a myth or, in Pinker's (1994) phrase "a pernicious illusion". Pinker claims that the conclusion that culturally deprived children lacked true language was erroneously based on the students' sullen or shy reactions to batteries of standardised tests. Pinker further claimed that American black culture is, in fact, "everywhere highly verbal", and that the linguistic abilities of working class people and less educated middle classes are badly underestimated. Pinker's views on the linguistic abilities of black American children from economically impoverished homes are influenced by Noam Chomsky's theory of language acquisition, which has been referred to earlier.

The rejection by theorists such as Chomsky and Pinker of the notion that the capacity to learn how to speak and understand speech is, in a sense, taught suggests that children who come to a school speaking different dialects or with regional accents do not have 'defective' language. The fact remains, however, that social background and children's communication skills are reliable predictors of children's performance at school.

One possible explanation for the link between social background and school performance is expressed in term of ease of communication between teachers and children from different backgrounds. Brown and her colleagues (1994) conducted an extensive investigation of communication between Scottish school children and their teachers. Underlying this Scottish research is a distinction between what the researchers term 'chat' and 'information giving speech'. The researchers studied 500 fourteen-to-seventeen year old school children, 300 of whom were judged by their schools to be in the lower third of their year in academic ability. The main findings of the study were that academically less able pupils were weak at using speech for information-giving purposes. They discovered that these pupils were usually incapable of providing coherent, comprehensive, informative narratives. Even when

asked to tell the researcher about familiar events the children were frequently uninformative and difficult to understand. By contrast, when the children were observed chatting to each other in pairs the pupils were talkative, were very often witty, and seemed to suffer no problems of communications. It is worth noting that the findings in relation to 'chat' were consistent with Chomsky's theory of the innateness of language acquisition whilst the findings on 'information giving speech' highlighted the difficulties caused by the differences between children's everyday experience of language and the use of language in schools.

Brown and her colleagues did more than observe: they designed an intervention programme which they felt would help children develop their crucial information-giving skills. The programme contained communication games in which one child had to tell another how to perform a task. Other tasks in the programme involved creating narratives.

Follow up studies of the programme found that the children remembered what they had learned, and that they were able to generalise what they had learned in one task to improve their performances in another. A significant finding was that the children who played the role of listeners were significantly more articulate and informative when it came to their turn to play the role of speaker than were the children who were first asked to act as speakers. This suggests that listening, at least in some contexts, is a more powerful tool for learning how to talk informatively than is exclusive experience as a speaker.

The apparent success of this intervention suggests that children can be helped to become more articulate and fluent in their powers of self-expression. It further suggests that children can demonstrate their innate language ability in relaxed conversation whilst facing considerable difficulties in trying to explain themselves or instruct others. There is also evidence that the information-giving skills which seem to be essential for academic success do not come about naturally or inevitably: they may demand the specific types of experience which were provided by Brown and her colleagues for the pupils in the intervention programme.

This has considerable relevance for the teaching of English in primary schools. It is important that children develop linguistic skills that are appropriate, not just to the social life of the community outside school, but that will enable them to benefit fully from the education system. In this context, the relationship between the linguistic abilities of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their success or otherwise in the school system is highly relevant. Although the English curriculum incorporates language activities such as those used by Brown and her colleagues, it may be relevant, in the process of reviewing the curriculum, to address specifically the language learning needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

At a more general level, this also raises the issue of what is sometimes seen as the tension between what the school attempts to do in terms of language development

and forms of language use outside school that seem to run counter to their efforts. In recent years, for example, widespread concern has been voiced about the effect that the prevalence of text messaging will have on the quality of pupils and pupils' language use. In particular, it has been said that it undermines what teachers are doing in school to develop language ability. Text messaging has indeed become a widespread phenomenon among young people, but it seems somewhat over-alarmist to regard it as having a deleterious effect on language use and language development. The principal function of language is communication. Text messaging represents a particular form of language use born of modern technology. The fact that it often pays scant attention to the conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation is analogous to that truncated use of language, 'telegamese', that was created by the technology of the day and the expense of using it. Should we consider 'C U 2' any more threatening to standards of English than 'Dublin Monday stop Wexford tonight stop see Wednesday stop'.

It can be argued that the form of language used in text messaging in no way runs counter to the aims and objectives of the English curriculum. The curriculum encourages the development of children's ability to recognise different registers of language and to use them appropriately. Just as a particular register of language is appropriate to a diary and another to writing a formal letter of congratulation or sympathy, the language of a text message may be seen, legitimately, as the form of language appropriate to the non-vocal use of the mobile phone. The important issue from a language and language learning point of view is that pupils recognise that it is a register of language and is not an acceptable use of language away from its natural home.

A distinctive feature of the Irish educational system is the importance that is given to the teaching and learning of Irish. As with all subjects, it is part of an integrated learning construct that is the Primary School Curriculum, but it is also a required subject at second level. It is perhaps worth considering, if only briefly, the *raison d'être* for this beyond a simplistic argument to nationalism.

The area of language in the Primary School Curriculum comprises English and Irish and this immediately raises practical questions in second language learning and teaching, whether this concerns Irish in the majority of schools, English in Gaeltacht schools, or the more complicated question of the second language in *scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge*. Whatever the particular language background of the school, it is important at the outset to acknowledge that second language teaching in Irish primary schools, addressing as it does the English and Irish languages, is qualitatively different from what might be normally understood by that term. In the case of teaching Irish as a second language, which is the situation in the overwhelming majority of schools, this derives from factors connected with Irish that would not pertain were the second language French, for example.

These have their basis in Irish linguistic, social and historical experience. Linguistically, there is a close and complex relationship between Irish and English that has its roots in the shifting, interactive coexistence of the two over a number of centuries. Although this culminated, in modern times, in the hegemony of English as the mother language of the majority of the population, the grammatical structure, the vocabulary and the idiomatic bent of English, as it is spoken in Ireland today, have been profoundly affected by Irish. Similarly, although less profoundly, spoken Irish reflects a reciprocal influence from English. Furthermore, the context in which these developments came about and the social, economic and national exigencies that caused them are part of the Irish historical experience. English as it is spoken in Ireland today and, to a lesser extent Irish, are inseparable in the Irish psyche from the historical memory of their origins. To this extent, language, be it Irish or English, is an essential expression in psychological and social terms of Irishness and of national identity and, as such, reflects some of the deeper aspirations, conflicts and contradictions of Irish society and experience.

Such complex considerations have far reaching implications for language learning and for learning generally in Irish primary schools and these will be addressed later. What is relevant at this point is to recognise that the choice of English and Irish as the language components of Irish primary education does reflect and acknowledge the essential linguistic and historical characteristics of Irish experience past and present. In educational terms, children can learn more effectively if language experience in school reflects as widely and as truly as possible the linguistic expression of Irish social and historical experience.

Chapter 2 asks some provocative questions about bilingualism as a context for the consideration of second and third language teaching in the following chapters.

The approaches to the teaching of Irish are dealt with in Chapter 3, and a variety of circumstances and contexts need to be considered. However, one overriding consideration should be taken into account. It is crucial that, whether the curriculum in primary school is to involve two or three languages, the approach to language teaching should not be seen in terms of teaching Irish or English or a modern language but in the context of language teaching as an entity.

Considerable attention is being given to the introduction of modern languages in primary schools. A pilot project was established in 1998 for the teaching of modern languages. Roughly ten per cent of Irish primary schools were involved in the project teaching French, German, Italian and Spanish, respectively, to fifth and sixth classes for one and a half hours per week. The evaluation of this project was published recently.

The teaching of a third language raises a variety of significant issues for primary education in general and for the Primary School Curriculum in particular. Based on the findings of the evaluation, international experience, and other factors related to third language teaching and learning, the NCCA will produce a report on the

feasibility of introducing modern languages in all primary schools.

The introduction of modern languages to the curriculum has considerable implications for teaching and learning in primary schools, including pre-service and in-service education, the allocation of time to different curriculum areas, and the continuity of language experience from first level to second level education.

One particular issue that relates to the fundamental nature of the Primary School Curriculum requires careful consideration. The curriculum was designed as an integrated learning construct. In principle, each curriculum area is given equal importance to the others, and all curriculum areas are compulsory. The curriculum does not espouse the concept of optional subjects. It could be argued that providing an experience of modern language learning in fifth and sixth classes only is not at variance with this principle. Learning in every curriculum area varies with the age and maturity of children, and the introduction of a third language could be viewed as an extension of language learning in the curriculum area, Language. However, this would be contingent on its being provided for all children in fifth and sixth classes. At present, subsequent to the pilot phase, the Modern Languages in Primary Schools' programme is being offered as a curriculum option in 10% or more of primary schools. This consorts ill with the principle of the curriculum as an integrated learning construct for all primary school children, and contravenes the principles of equity and inclusiveness. This and other issues in relation to modern language teaching are dealt with in detail in Chapter 5.

One of the most significant changes in Irish society in recent years has been the influx of non-nationals from a variety of countries. These include visa holders, work permit holders, and asylum-seekers. This has resulted in the enrolment of a large number of children in primary schools whose first language is neither English nor Irish. The practical consequences of this for teaching and learning and for school organisation are far ranging.

The Integrate Ireland Language Teaching programme, sponsored by the DES and organised from Trinity College, Dublin, is currently addressing the language needs of children in primary schools whose first language is not English or Irish. The approach adopted is based on the five skills of the Common European Framework, the six Common Reference Levels of the Council of Europe, and on the European Language Portfolio, which has three obligatory components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. A more detailed description of this initiative, its operation, and issues arising in relation to the teaching and learning of non-national children, is contained in Chapter 4. This chapter also describes a questionnaire issued to a sample of language support teachers in relation to teaching English to non-national children and analyses the responses to the questionnaire.

All the many issues addressed in this document were intended to provide the basis for discussion by delegates at the Education Conference. The deliberations of the conference, the views expressed, and the conclusions reached are now included in this report.



# English in the Primary School

## **A. PRIMARY ENGLISH CURRICULUM**

The English curriculum is based on two fundamental principles:

- 1 language is indivisible;
- 1 children not only learn language but learn through language.

The curriculum is structured in a way that reflects these principles. In order to emphasise the first, oral language, reading and writing are inextricably linked in language use and language learning. The main divisions of the curriculum, the strands, are not these three skills but four wider language learning goals. The strands are:

- 1 receptiveness to language;
- 1 competence and confidence in using language;
- 1 developing cognitive abilities through language;
- 1 emotional and imaginative development through language.

In each strand there are three strand units based on activity in oral language, reading and writing. In this way, each of the strands represents an integrated language experience for the child in which the three skills interact and cross fertilise one another.

The second principle is also reflected in the organisation of the strands. In broad terms the first two, Receptiveness to language and competence and confidence in using language, are directed at the child's language learning. The other two, developing cognitive abilities through language and emotional and imaginative development through language, are concerned with stimulating the child's learning through language. However, such is the centrality of the first principle and such is the complexity of language and the process of language learning, both learning language and learning through language are of necessity addressed in all the strands.

Nevertheless, the strands represent the four broad goals of the curriculum and are central to its realisation as a language programme.

Oral language is a crucial element of experience in each of the strands and at every level. It has a crucial role not just in both reading and writing activities as part of the English curriculum but as a teaching strategy in every curriculum area. Much oral language work will be accomplished in these two contexts; nevertheless, it is envisaged that the teacher will also need to devote discreet time to oral language in mediating the English curriculum.

The approach to reading espoused by the curriculum reflects the most successful international theory and practice. The development of phonological and phonemic awareness is at the core of the emergent reading phase. This is addressed through extensive oral language activity, involving rhymes, rhythmic activities, language games, and onset and rime. These activities will take place in context of a print-rich environment, of which the library corner will be a central feature, an experience of collaborative reading with teacher using large-format books and language experience materials, and the provision of consistent opportunities to browse and read books in the library corner. It is envisaged that children will not engage with formal reading until the senior infant class.

From the beginning the child will be encouraged to read for meaning and to respond to text in a variety of ways. S/he is also encouraged to a wide variety of material, that will include narrative, informational and representative texts. Arising from the importance given to reading for meaning, great stress is laid on the development of comprehension skills, the basic comprehension skills at first and later the higher comprehension skills.

The approach to writing in the curriculum is based on the principle that children learn to write through writing. They are encouraged to write on a wide range of topics, for different audiences, and in a variety of genres. Central to the approach, from the earliest years, is the process of writing, editing and redrafting. This enables the child to draft a piece of writing and then discuss it with the teacher. Through this conferencing process, as the curriculum terms it, the teacher will, by suggestion, and encouragement, help the child to improve the expressiveness and accuracy of the writing, with the eventual aim of enabling the child to become an independent writer who recognises different registers of language and their appropriate use. It is principally through the writing process, also, that the child's mastery of grammar, punctuation and spelling are developed.

## **B. FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS**

Teachers received three days of in-service education on the English curriculum during the school year 1999–2000. This consisted of two days of seminars on the curriculum and one day devoted to school-based planning. The implementation of the new approaches to the teaching and learning of English began in September of the school year 2000–2001. Teachers have, therefore, been teaching the curriculum for three years.

Although the implementation of the curriculum in English is still in the transition phase, since it will be another five years before children will have experienced the curriculum throughout their years in primary school, the INTO Education Committee felt that it would be useful to establish the views of teachers as to the extent to which the curriculum was being implemented, those elements they considered most successful and least successful, and any constraints or difficulties they were experiencing implementing it. To this end it was decided to conduct some focus group research with teachers.

The focus groups were organised and conducted by members of the committee. Six groups were involved in different locations throughout the country. Four of the groups comprised teachers in schools where English is the medium of instruction and the other two comprised teachers in Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna, respectively. In the case of the first four groups the teachers reflected the full spectrum of classes in large and small, urban and rural primary schools. Of necessity, this range of experience was not reflected to the same extent in the two other groups.

Although, because of the narrow base of the teachers from the Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna who took part, it would be difficult to draw any firm, valid conclusions, it was felt, nevertheless, that the views that emerged would, to some extent, enrich the picture in relation to the teaching and learning of English.

Teachers from schools where English is the medium of instruction were asked to discuss the following questions:

1. How do you approach the teaching of the strands of the English curriculum?
2. How do you plan and organise your time allocation to oral language?
3. To what extent and in what way do you use oral language activity as a teaching strategy across the curriculum?
4. Do you use a class reader(s)? If so how do you ensure that children experience a wide range of different types of text?
5. In what ways do you encourage children to respond to text and how does your approach to the teaching of comprehension skills relate to this?
6. How do you use the process of writing, editing and redrafting in helping children to write for different purposes and for different audiences?

7. How do you ensure that children have experience of writing on a range of topics for different audiences and what input do children have in this process?
8. How do you approach the teaching of grammar, punctuation and spelling?
9. What are your in-service needs in English?

Separate questions were prepared for Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna, since the circumstances of teaching English in those schools are different from those pertaining in schools where English is the medium of instruction.

### **How do you approach the teaching of the strands in the English curriculum?**

Teachers were asked to discuss this question because the four strands of the English curriculum are not stated as the traditional divisions of oral language, reading and writing, but in terms of four wider language learning goals in which oral language, reading and writing are integrated.

The reaction to the question was unequivocal. Teachers are not teaching the strands; they are clinging to the traditional approach of teaching oral language, reading and writing more or less discretely. To this extent the structure of the curriculum, directed as it is towards effecting an integrated approach to language learning, has not found favour with teachers.

A number of reasons were put forward for this. English was the first subject in which the teachers received in-service, and the concept of the strands and their relationship to the strand units of oral language, reading and writing was not fully understood. Furthermore, it was indicated that they were not familiar with the detail of the curriculum when they attended the seminars. Indeed, more than one teacher said that s/he had not even opened either the curriculum or the guidelines. In more than one of the groups the view was expressed that, with the experience of the curriculum that they have acquired over the past three years, teachers would now gain much more out of the in-service programme in relation to the strands.

In that context, teachers found it difficult to use the strands in planning and implementing the curriculum. Trying to plan through the strands was a source of confusion, and they found it much easier to plan oral language, reading and writing activities separately. It was also pointed out in one group that, whereas the curriculum was structured in the strands Receptiveness to language, Competence and confidence in using language, Developing cognitive abilities through language, and Emotional and imaginative development through language, the *Teacher Guidelines* are structured along the traditional lines of oral language, reading and writing, and that this led to further confusion. The focus on the strands that the curriculum proposes would seem to have been a radical change that teachers, so far, have failed to accept,

and the programme of in-service has failed to convert them. As one participant said:

*“We are too long teaching reading, writing and oral work, and we are still thinking like that.”*

If teachers are finding difficulty in organising their teaching of the English curriculum through the strands, as the curriculum is structured, then this may, possibly, be symptomatic of a fault in the structure. Equally, it may indicate that the radical shift in the re-organisation of the curriculum represents a challenge for teachers that has been underestimated, and that further in-service education is needed that will be directed towards developing their understanding of the new approach and providing them with planning and teaching strategies that will enable them to implement more effectively the language-integrated approach the curriculum espouses.

### **How do you plan and organise your time allocation to oral language?**

#### **To what extent and in what way do you use oral language activity as a teaching strategy across the curriculum?**

Both these questions deal with oral language and, perhaps inevitably, discussion tended to cover both at the same time.

The emphasis on oral language and the view espoused by the curriculum that children’s talk was now a central element in classroom were welcomed. As one participant said:

*“At least it is acceptable now that children can talk to each other.”*

There was positive acceptance, too, of the importance of oral language in children’s development. In more that one group the importance of enabling children to ask questions, give clear directions, use the phone, and take turns in conversation were evinced as examples of life skills that children needed.

There is clear evidence, too, that much more oral language activity is taking place in the classroom than heretofore. Much of this activity is taking place across the curriculum, and oral language seems to be firmly embedded in teaching strategies in every curriculum area. Teachers see this form of oral language activity as very much a part of the programme in English.

A popular approach in planning for oral language is the use of themes and topics that can be integrated with two or more subjects. Mathematics, geography, history, science and RSE were mentioned in respect. There was some evidence, too, that some teachers saw the value of oral language activity in developing children’s cognitive abilities when dealing with topics and themes, and that there was a positive

relationship between discussion and learning. It was stressed, however, that planning should not be so inflexible as to inhibit the teacher in using opportunities for oral language activities as these arise spontaneously in the course of classroom activity.

There was also evidence that a considerable amount of oral language activity was being used in responding to text. However, oral language was mentioned only once in relation to writing. This will be further developed when addressing the questions directly related to writing.

Many teachers are using commercially-produced materials that are directed towards stimulating children's oral language development. Reaction to these was somewhat mixed. Some were found very helpful, particularly by junior class teachers, but considerable dissatisfaction with senior class materials was expressed. In some cases it was felt that they did not stretch the children sufficiently, and were not sufficient of themselves to answer children's needs. There was clear evidence that teachers were using them selectively and supplementing them with a range of other activities.

Teachers had problems in planning discrete time for oral language activity, and preferred, as has been indicated, to plan its integration with other subjects; but, although this does not strictly involve the planning of discrete time for oral language activity, it is indicative of planning for the use of oral language. There was some evidence, however, that there was some planning of discrete time for oral language activity, in ten or fifteen minute slots once or twice a week, and one teacher spoke of school planning discrete time for oral language activity in her school. It was pointed out, too, that there had always been more emphasis on oral language activity in junior classes, so that the advent of the new curriculum hadn't changed the situation that greatly. There was some evidence in more senior classes, however, that the morning news, for example, was being done orally rather than in writing.

A number of other issues were raised in relation to oral language activity in the classroom. Teachers in multi-class situations had particular problems. Older children tended to dominate discussions, although teachers in single-class situations encountered similar problems in relation to children who were more confident and articulate than others. One solution put forward was the use of groups of like age to discuss topics relevant to them. The problem of class size was seen as an inhibiting factor in managing oral language activities, but there was considerable evidence of group and one-to-one activity. Teachers with experience of schools in disadvantaged areas also encountered particular problems. Young children, especially, had language skills below the level of many of their peers and needed considerable vocabulary enriching work to enable them to benefit fully from the approach to oral language in the curriculum. One teacher spoke of the necessity of teaching children the vocabulary relating to a topic or a theme before embarking on oral language activity related to it. Another said that, in her school, they approached oral language

development as a second language. Participants also articulated difficulties they encountered in assessing oral language development, in assessing progress and attainment, and in assessing the effectiveness of the methods they were using. A number of approaches to oral language assessment were mentioned. These included the use of audio and video tapes, and one-to-one sessions between teacher and child every three weeks or so. Finally, teachers felt they were not properly trained for oral language teaching or for recognising problems in oral language. They felt more in-service education was needed and, although they gained valuable strategies such as 'Circle Time' from the seminar days, these had happened so long ago, and they were so unfamiliar with the lay-out of the curriculum at the time, that they did not benefit from them as much as they felt they should.

**Do you use a class reader(s)? If so, how do you ensure that children experience a wide range of different types of text?**

**In what ways do you encourage children to respond to text and how does your approach to the teaching of comprehension skills relate to this?**

It is clear from the discussion of these two questions that teachers have enthusiastically embraced the greater part of the new approaches to reading. This is evident in the obvious increase in the amount children are reading in school, the greater variety of texts they are reading, the different ways they are being encouraged to respond to text, the extent to which school and class libraries are being used, and the willingness of teachers to use discrimination in choosing reading materials.

Use of the novel seems to be widespread in schools. In some schools it is used as the principal reading material in class, but more commonly it is used in conjunction with a variety of other reading materials. Approaches to its use are varied and imaginative. In some cases, particularly in the junior classes, the teacher reads the novel aloud and children respond to it. In other cases, children read in groups and discuss what they read. In other cases still, children read novels individually and the teacher encourages response in a variety of ways. A common strategy is to use the extracts from novels that are included in materials produced by the educational publishing companies as a springboard in encouraging children to read the complete novel. In many cases this seems to be very successful. Opinion was divided on whether children should be allowed to read a novel in school only, or read it in school and then take it home to read it further or finish it. It was the experience of some participants that, if children were only allowed to read a novel in school, they were stimulated in their reading in school because they wanted to find out 'what happened next'. Other participants felt that allowing them to take the book home tended to encourage them to read in their own time.

Opinion on reading materials being produced by educational publishing companies

was mixed, but it was generally more critical than positive. One set of materials was praised, but the company created great dissatisfaction by discontinuing it or suspending the publication of further copies. Some participants commented favourably on some examples of parallel readers, but there was general dissatisfaction with activity books and workbooks, although there was some agreement that the quality of some of these had improved and that they were of some use. A notable point of consensus was that, although commercially-produced reading materials were widely used, teachers were consistently supplementing them with other reading material of their own choosing, in particular with library books. In one group particular dissatisfaction with materials for the infant classes was expressed. One participant said she had ceased to use them and was creating her own reading material for the children by encouraging them to produce stories of their own, which were then used for reading. In general, teachers were moving away from the class reader or core reader. Some teachers still use it but supplement it with other material. It was felt that the class reader was still useful in meeting the reading needs of weaker readers and that if they could feel that they finished at least one book in a year they were encouraged. One participant voiced the interesting criticism that the publishing companies were “short-changing teachers” by including insufficient material in the core reader to last the year, thereby forcing teachers to use supplementary materials.

It was evident from the discussions that teachers are encouraging children to respond to text more than they did before the curriculum began to be implemented. This, to some extent, is a factor of the greater range of children’s reading in school, but it is also an indication of the extent to which teachers have embraced the new approaches. However, response is largely encouraged through the more traditional forms of oral language, writing and art. There was no indication of encouraging children to respond in other and perhaps more imaginative ways such as dance, drama and mime. In general, teachers seem to find it easier to get children to respond to fiction rather than informational text. The opinion was expressed that this was because children could relate fiction more easily to their own experiences. Opinion was divided on the value of asking children to respond to a novel chapter by chapter as some of the commercially-produced supplementary materials espoused. Some participants found that this ‘turned children off’, but others found it stimulated them.

Although participants recognised the importance of developing children’s higher comprehension skills little evidence emerged from the discussions that these were being addressed satisfactorily. Reference was made to the importance of oral language work and the use of discussion in relation to developing comprehension skills. One participant indicated that this was the way comprehension was approached in her school:

*“I think good comprehension is best done orally, and that’s the way we do it.”*

Another stressed the use of discussion in developing comprehension skills and another oral language activity before reading the text. In general, however, teachers had not embraced, or perhaps did not understand the essence of, the approach to comprehension that is recommended in the *Teacher Guidelines for English*. In general, apart from the instances referred to, the role of oral language in the approach to developing comprehension skills was ignored; and the process of reflecting before reading the text, while reading the text, and after reading the text that is recommended in the guidelines was not even referred to. Participants recognised that more was expected of teachers in addressing the development of comprehension skills but, by and large, were content to rely on commercially-produced materials to teach them. There was also, it seemed, a misconception as to the relationship between response to text and comprehension. They seemed to be seen as two mutually exclusive areas. This may stem from a fault in the guidelines or from a failure to address effectively the issue of the development of the higher comprehension skills in the PCSP seminar days. The overwhelming impression from the discussions was that teachers rely heavily on the comprehension elements in commercially-produced materials in addressing the development of comprehension skills, and at the same time considerable dissatisfaction with the materials was expressed in all the groups. Another concern that was expressed was a fear of turning children off reading if it was linked to comprehension, and there seemed to be a tendency to divorce fiction from informational text in this respect. Nevertheless, concern was expressed that there was a palpable gap between children's reading skills and their comprehension skills.

The importance of both the school and class libraries was acknowledged in all the discussion groups, and the use of the library would seem to have become a central element in children's reading experience. Opinion differed as to the relative importance of the school and class libraries. Although some participants felt that it was better to provide children with the facility of a good school library, on balance the greater importance of the class library was acknowledged. One participant said that, in her school, reference books were kept in the school library and fiction in the class libraries.

Attitudes of parents, both helpful and unhelpful, were discussed. In one disadvantaged school where parents had been involved in a shared reading scheme the children's literacy skills benefited enormously. In other cases, however, parents were not as convinced of the new approaches. In particular, they would prefer to see reading schemes and class readers retained. They were also quite willing to pay for workbooks and activity books for their children which provided, in their eyes, palpable evidence that their children were following a particular programme of work, whatever its intrinsic value was as an educational exercise, but they were most unwilling to pay for photocopying facilities through which teacher might produce comprehension materials that were much more beneficial in educational terms.

**How do you use the process of writing, editing and redrafting in helping children to write for different purposes and for different audiences?**

**How do you ensure that children have experience of writing on a range of topics for different audiences and what input do children have in this process?**

**How do you approach the teaching of grammar, punctuation and spelling?**

It is evident from the discussions that, whatever caveats are expressed in the context of the description and analysis of the implementation of the approaches to writing that follows, children are being encouraged to write and are enjoying writing in the primary school.

The approach to the teaching of writing espoused by the primary school curriculum, sometimes called process writing, emphasises the importance of teaching children to write through writing. This is effected through a process of writing, editing and redrafting. Such a process envisages children writing a piece following initial discussion involving the teacher and the class, the production of a first draft, having a 'conference' with the teacher about this draft, and redrafting the piece in a way that reflects that process of conferencing. This process may or may not be repeated one or more times, depending on the nature, purpose and audience of the piece. Alternatively, only one draft might be necessary or further drafts might be called for.

The discussions indicated that teachers' commitment to, and acceptance of, this approach to the writing is mixed. Some participants felt that it made children very excited about the writing process, that they put much more thought into their writing, and took a lot more trouble with the final presentation of their writing. Others had considerable reservations about it, and it was evident that these reservations were inhibiting teachers from committing themselves fully to this approach.

A number of participants were making genuine and reasonable attempts to follow the approach outlined in the curriculum and guidelines. However, a number of misconceptions as to the nature of the approach were evident. Chief among these was a faulty understanding of the purpose of the elements of conferencing and redrafting in the process. The curriculum envisages these as being principally directed towards improving children's powers of expression in written language. The discussions, however, make it abundantly clear that participants' conception of the purpose of this exercise is to correct technical mistakes in grammar, punctuation and spelling in children's writing rather than to improve their powers of expression. Furthermore, the discussions indicated a certain reluctance on the part of participants to commit themselves to the process of writing, conferencing, editing and redrafting. There was considerable evidence that teachers continue the practice of inserting written corrections in children's work, and, although these may take the form of symbols

indicating changes that children may need to interpret themselves in order to make necessary changes, it would seem that considerable progress needs to be made before teachers are implementing the approach to writing advocated in the English curriculum and guidelines. This was evident in the following remark of one participant:

*“The only way I could get them to edit was if I corrected it with them.”*

Even the use of the word “corrected” is indicative of a misconception of the process of conferencing, which should not be concerned with correcting children’s writing but with improving it.

Further confusion was exhibited in relation to the writing, editing and redrafting process since some participants seemed to conceive it as a process that would always involve three or more drafts, whereas the number of drafts a piece of writing might require would depend on both the purpose of the writing and the audience for which it was intended.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that teachers are making serious efforts to engage with the approaches to writing espoused by the curriculum. Participants spoke of:

- 1 using brainstorming in preparing for writing;
- 1 using groups in the conferencing process;
- 1 using peer conferencing;
- 1 using different genres, such as the class newspaper, letters to local papers, and email;
- 1 displaying children’s writing in the classroom and throughout the school;
- 1 having competitions for children’s writing.

Examples were also given of teachers encouraging children to work in groups in order to decide on the theme and genre of a piece of writing and plan its final presentation, while making themselves available for conferencing during the process. However, from the discussions this would not appear to be the norm. The importance of the crucial effect of children’s experience of good literature on their writing was also stressed.

A recurring issue articulated in all the groups was the difficulty of motivating children to redraft their writing. A common complaint was that they found it boring and that it turned them off writing. This was particularly the case with senior classes. It was also a source of frustration to teachers that even when children did redraft a piece of writing new mistakes appeared in the second draft. However, there was agreement that if they had the experience of editing and redrafting from the earliest years and had got used to it, if the subject of the writing was something that interested them, if the purpose of the writing was clear to them, and if they perceived

conferencing as something more than the mere correcting of mistakes, they took a more positive view of it. Children were also quite happy to draft a paragraph but showed great reluctance to draft a whole piece. There was general agreement that word processing helped to motivate children to redraft and made it much more manageable than doing it by hand.

There is considerable evidence from the discussions that children are writing in a variety of genres. However, evidence is less clear that they are being encouraged to write for a range of purposes and audiences. Furthermore, although some participants encouraged children to choose the topics for their own writing, at least on occasions, the majority did not see either the importance or the relevance of this. One participant said:

*“I didn’t think about it before, but I will try it.”*

There was, on the other hand, some acknowledgement that children took more care with their writing and produced better work if they were aware of the purpose of the writing and its possible audience.

*“If it is going to be read by a wider audience they will be more careful.”*

There was little evidence in any of the groups that participants saw the link between encouraging children to write on a range of topics for different purposes and a variety of audiences and developing children’s ability to recognise different registers of language and to write in different registers of language. There was a tendency, too, to confuse genres with the concept of language register. This seems to relate back to the narrow view participants took of the purpose of conferencing as outlined above. The term language register was not used by any participant in any group. When the interlocutor in one group brought up the subject it did not evince much interest. Only a small number of participants seemed to show an appreciation of the function of different language registers. One expressed the view that exposing children to different language registers in their reading and drawing attention to them was helpful. Another, during a discussion about the use of text messaging and the deleterious effects this had on children’s use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, expressed the view that the way language was used in text messaging was completely appropriate to both purpose and audience.

There was some recognition of the importance of teaching grammar and punctuation in the context of writing. This was more evident among participants who were teaching senior classes than those who were teaching junior classes. The potential of the conferencing process in developing children’s mastery of the conventions of grammar and punctuation did not seem to be fully appreciated. There was a recognition that it was in engaging with children about their writing that these issues needed to be addressed, but in too many cases this does not seem to go much

beyond 'correcting mistakes' in the text. There was, however, a clear acknowledgement of the importance to children of a control of the conventions of grammar and punctuation and of the importance of formal lessons in these areas. It was less obvious that participants felt that such lessons should be linked to common errors observed by the teacher during the process of conferencing and redrafting.

Approaches to the teaching of spelling are varied. Some teachers are still using spelling lists without any reference to mistakes in children's writing, and some are using spelling books. Others do note common mistakes in writing and teach to these, while there is a widespread use of dictionaries during the writing process. There was, in general, an acknowledgement of the need for a structured approach to the teaching of spelling but no evidence that the multi-dimensional approach recommended and outlined in the teacher guidelines was being used.

There was some discussion of the use of computers in children's writing. The value of using word processing for the purpose of editing and redrafting has already been noted. One participant spoke highly of the value of using email in encouraging children to write and communicate with other schools, while another indicated that she used a CD that helped with the teaching of spelling.

Other issues raised during the discussion of writing included the constraints of large classes, the difficulty in mediating the writing programme to weaker children, and the unsuitability of the programme to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **What are your in-service needs in English?**

When discussing their future in-service needs the participants reiterated (as has been already noted above) that, because English was the first subject in which teachers received in-service and because much of the terminology was new, teachers assimilated less than they might have during the seminar days. They felt that future in-service education in English would be more valuable now. There was general agreement that it should be differentiated to cater for the specific needs of teachers at different levels. There was also agreement that it should cater specifically for the needs of teachers with multi-class groups. It was strongly felt, too, that the curriculum and teacher guidelines did not give teachers sufficient assistance in addressing the needs of children with special learning disabilities and the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that future in-service education should cater for these areas. There was overwhelming agreement that future in-service education should include a large element of discussion. Participants felt that they could learn a lot from exchanging ideas with other teachers and finding out what had worked for them in different situations and in different aspects of the English curriculum.

## GAELTACHT SCHOOLS

1. When is the teaching of oral language in English begun in your school?
2. How do you plan the allocation of time to oral language activity in English and how much time do you allocate to it?
3. When is the teaching of reading begun in your school and how closely are the recommendations in the English curriculum and guidelines followed, particularly in relation to early reading activities?
4. How do you ensure that children experience a wide range of different types of text as is recommended in the English curriculum?
5. In what ways do you encourage children to respond to text and how do you approach the teaching of the higher comprehension skills?
6. When do children start writing in English in your school, and to what extent is the process of writing, editing and redrafting used?
7. How do you ensure that children have experience of writing on a range of topics for different audiences and what input do children have in this process?
8. How do you approach the teaching of grammar, punctuation and spelling?
9. What are your in-service needs in English?

### Oral Language

In general teachers in this group displayed less enthusiasm about the English curriculum than their counterparts in gaelscoileanna or in schools where English is the medium of instruction. A leitmotiv throughout the discussion was the difficulty of mediating the curriculum in the multiclass situation, and participants felt they had little or no preparation by way of pre-service or in-service training to deal with it. This was raised in the context of every question that was put to the group. Participants felt that, heretofore, insufficient time was given to oral English, and that by the time children reached the senior classes their command of oral language skills in English was inadequate, and concern was expressed about this in the context of their progression to second level. Currently, discrete time given to oral English among participants varied from half an hour a week to an hour a week. It was felt, too, that too much time was being spent on reading and writing in English at the expense of oral language activity. At the same time, one participant indicated that s/he had difficulties in discouraging the children from speaking English. Dissatisfaction was also expressed at the lack of materials available to support the teaching of oral English.

## Reading

Participants felt that, in the context of Gaeltacht schools, the curriculum was overloaded, not just in English but throughout the curriculum generally, and that the predominance of multigrade teaching in Gaeltacht schools militated against the effective teaching of the approaches to reading. It is worth noting that, perhaps because of the particular personnel in the group, no reference was made to the issue of emergent reading or the teaching of reading. The discussion concentrated on response to text and on comprehension skills. There was some evidence that teachers were using the novel, and one participant spoke of one novel a year being done with each class from third to sixth. In this case too, however, the issue of multigrade teaching was raised, particularly in the context of finding novels that would be suitable for an extended age range. There was little evidence, except in the case of one participant, of a commitment to group teaching methods in this context. Little was said about how or to what extent participants encouraged children to respond to the text they engaged with. There was a recognition of the importance of the higher level comprehension skills, but there appeared to be an over-reliance on commercially produced materials in addressing these skills. As with participants who taught in schools where English was the medium of instruction, little evidence was evinced that teachers had espoused the approach to the teaching of the higher comprehension skills that is outlined in the *Teacher Guidelines for English*.

## Writing

As was evident in the discussions of teachers in schools where English is the medium of instruction, this group showed an imperfect understanding of the approach to writing. They were aware of the process of writing, editing and redrafting, but tended to see it as an exercise in correcting mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation. There was little indication of conferencing with the teacher in order to improve the children's expressive use of language. Participants felt, by and large, that the exercise was time consuming; that if it was worth doing, it was worth doing only once a month. They noted, as well, that children were reluctant to engage with the process of writing, editing and redrafting, but this may arise, as in the case of teachers in schools where English is the medium of instruction, from an imperfect understanding of the purpose of conferencing, which should be concerned primarily with improving children's expressive use of language.

## Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

There was little indication that the participants, any more than their counterparts in other schools included in this research, appreciated that the curriculum and guidelines

envisage that the mastery of these skills should be developed, primarily, in the course of the writing process. It was a consensus in the group that the development of the higher comprehension skills was approached, by and large, by using materials available from commercial publishing companies.

### **In-service Education**

Participants cited, in the strongest terms, their desire for in-service education that would enable teachers to address the mediation of the curriculum in the context of multiclass teaching. They also indicated that in-service education dealing with children with special needs and with children from disadvantaged background was needed.

### **GAELSCOILEANNA**

1. When do you start teaching the English curriculum or when is the teaching of oral language in English begun in your school?
2. Since oral language activity in English is not used as a teaching strategy across the curriculum, and since English is not the everyday language of the school, how do you plan the allocation of time for oral language activity in English and how much time do you allocate to it?
3. When is the teaching of reading begun in your school and how closely are the recommendations in the English curriculum and guidelines followed, particularly in relation to early reading activities?
4. Are you satisfied with the standard of English reading in your class and with the standard of their English reading when they leave your school?
5. Since children experience much less oral language activity in English in a Gaelscoil than they do in an ordinary school, how do you ensure that children who are experiencing language difficulties in English receive the exposure to oral language activity in English that is part of the necessary compensatory assistance they need?
6. In what ways do you encourage children to respond to text and how do you approach the teaching of the higher comprehension skills?
7. When do children start writing in English in your school, and to what extent is the process of writing, editing and redrafting used?
8. How do you ensure that children have experience of writing on a range of topics for different audiences, particularly when they do not write in English in other areas of the curriculum?

9. Are you satisfied that the approaches to the teaching of reading in your school prepare children adequately to deal with English in post-primary school and with post-primary education generally?
10. What are your in-service needs in English?

### **Oral Language**

On the whole, the attitude of participants in this group to the curriculum was positive. Practice as to when English is introduced differs from school to school. Some schools, as represented by this group, did oral English for ten or fifteen minutes a day in junior infants while others did no oral language activity in English until the middle of the second term of senior infants. One participant said that in her school oral language news was done in Irish and English on alternate days. It was felt that children who experience difficulties in oral English generally experience difficulties in oral Irish as well, and that much of the child's success depended on the language of the home. Similarly, English reading was begun, variously in senior infants or in first class. It was evident that there was no common approach as to when English should be introduced or when reading in English should start. Schools were trying different approaches. However, parents found this confusing. It was apparent from the discussion that parents, particularly those with children in junior classes, were concerned about their children's standard of reading. It was these parents rather than parents of children in senior classes who attended parent teacher meetings.

In the more senior classes half an hour a week would typically be given to oral language activity and a considerable amount of oral language activity was based on the use of reading materials. Participants were conscious that using Irish as the language of instruction in subjects such as history, geography and science very much limited one context for oral language activity in English. However, there was general agreement that some English was used in the mediation of these subjects, whether because textbooks were not available in Irish, children had difficulty in understanding the material when it was taught through Irish, or because reference books were available only in English when project work was being undertaken. Terminology, in mathematics for example, was given in Irish and English or was explained in English. Without knowing the English terms it was felt that they would be at a considerable disadvantage when transferring to second level and in taking standardised tests.

### **Reading**

Among the participants reading in English was begun variously in senior infants or first class, although in either case some informal work on emergent reading activities had already been done. In no case were English reading and Irish reading begun at the

same time. The gap between the two was never less than a term. However, participants acknowledged that practice varied from school to school. On the standards of reading being attained there was no agreement. Some were satisfied and others were not. There was, however, a consensus in the group on the influence of the home background and the input of parents to the reading process. Indeed reading attainment levels seemed to depend very much on the extent to which parents read to their children, encouraged them to read, and monitored their progress in reading.

*“What’s done in the home has a huge part to play.”*

This sprang from parents’ fears that their children might fall behind. It was also said that the type of parents who chose to send their children to a Gaelscoil tended to have a significant input to their children’s education. This gave children an advantage in terms of the support they received at home. Two participants spoke of using a shared reading scheme.

### **Response to Text and the Development of Comprehension Skills**

Although it was evident from the discussion that children were experiencing a greater variety of text, the class reader was still quite common. It was felt that children were encouraged to respond to text in the same manner as other schools. However, less time was spent on comprehension, and it was acknowledged that teachers in gaelscoileanna did not have the opportunity to address comprehension skills across the curriculum. It was felt that this led teachers in gaelscoileanna to plan more carefully for English. It was felt that the standard of reading in senior classes was satisfactory.

### **Writing**

There was general agreement that writing in English was begun at the same time as reading in English. This varied from senior infants to first class. Narrative writing seemed to be the principal focus of children’s writing. However, this reflected, generally, the practice in schools where English is the medium of instruction. Children particularly liked creating their own books. The group was less than enthusiastic about the process of writing, editing and redrafting, and were reluctant to involve children in it too often. It was felt it was time consuming and turned children off.

### **Future In-service Requirements**

The discussion of this issue was brief, but there was consensus that in-service education was needed in helping teachers to cater for children with special needs.

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# Second Language Learning in the Irish Context

*“You know, you could spend the whole year – day in, day out – bursting yourself to get through a good Gaeilge programme with your class and, at the end of that year, the inspector could walk in ... say a few words in Irish to your class and they would all look at him as though they had been shot. Not a word back would he get, and you’d wonder ... what have I been doing and where has it got me?”*

The above quote from a long-experienced teacher is probably fairly typical of the views of practitioners who labour in our bilingual system of primary education. And it raises some disconcerting questions: what is the system trying to achieve, what does it achieve, how effective is it in promoting the language, and what implications are therein for the proposed introduction of modern languages to Irish primary schools?

For the purposes of this chapter, the simple convention of Mackey (1968) will be followed and bilingualism considered at its simplest, viz. the alternate use of two or more languages. That implies that the term ‘bilingualism’ will also be used to cover multilingualism. However, it is likely to be useful to give consideration to some other concepts and terms that are used when this subject is under discussion, in the hope that it might clarify some of the issues and aspirations abroad in Ireland at this time.

Ireland is very probably unique in that it gives a constitutional status of supremacy to a language that is a low-utility entity. Put another way, Irish was given *de jure* ascendancy while all the time it laboured under *de facto* minority status, perhaps therein giving the genesis of a peculiarly Irish phenomenon seen frequently in later years – an Irish solution to an Irish problem.

From the adoption of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* in 1937, and for some years prior to that, there has been an institutionalised movement and policy to revive the Irish language. For the best part of a century now, a constant effort has been made by various arms of the state – and the primary schools, in particular – to foster the use of the language and to promote it from the rank of a low-status, low-utility entity. This work has gone on against the backdrop of an inexorable rise in the linguistic world domi-

nance of what is widely accepted as our mother tongue, ie. English, and the gradual demise of Celtic languages on the so-called 'Celtic Fringe'. There is now a concomitant growth in the urgency of calls for an early introduction of other high-status, high-utility modern languages, for example Spanish, impelled probably by economic exigencies and a realisation that, as we travel more, we are disadvantaged by our comfortable reliance on a first language that is, coincidentally, the dominant world language. It is also noteworthy that there is a growth in the number of pupils attending Irish primary schools whose first language is neither English nor Irish.

There is ample proof that these misgivings have existed for some time now. More than a quarter of a century ago, the lengthy and widely respected report from the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (CLAR 1975) illustrated the extent of the paradoxical nature of national attitudes to the language. For example, two-thirds of the population agreed with the statement "Ireland would not really be Ireland without its Irish-speaking people" while seventy-nine per cent affirmed their belief that "Irish is less useful than any continental language", the same percentage that averred that "most people do not care about the fate of the language". So the question might be posed: is it injudicious for our policy-makers and educators to support the maintenance of our national bilingual education when it is backed up by an avowed public support that is emasculated by widespread public scepticism? And what are the implications for us regarding plans to move towards multilingualism in the senior classes of Irish primary schools, as outlined by the NCCA in *Modern Languages in Primary Schools – Curriculum and Teacher Guidelines*? It may well emerge that primary teachers are going to be set the daunting task of squaring a rather large circle.

## **A DEFINITION OF BILINGUALISM**

In the area of bilingualism, one can encounter a farrago of terms. It is useful to have an understanding of these, for otherwise the subject becomes rapidly impenetrable. The following paragraphs will consider some of the more frequently encountered terms.

One can start by asking: what is bilingualism? Not surprisingly, different theorists will have differing definitions and will often disagree on the fundamental question of just where exactly a person moves from monolingual status to that of being bilingual. This is invariably a question of degree. It can range from a simple understanding of two languages to the ability to produce meaningful utterances in the two languages to a mastery of the two languages. A more obvious distinction can be made when a person is unable to make meaningful utterances in a second language but can

understand utterances made by another in that language. Linguists generally characterise this as passive bilingualism or receptive bilingualism or semi-bilingualism.

From what has already been said, degrees of bilingualism exist in the same way as degrees of proficiency exist in all aspects of human endeavour. As Eamonn Dunphy once famously stated, “he’s a good player, but not a great player”. So too there are degrees of facility in another language. This brings us to the concept of the balanced bilingual where a person’s command of a second language is more or less equal to the first. Linguists use varying measurements to ascertain if an individual is a balanced bilingual, frequently using rating scales of a plus and minus nature. When the aggregate result emerges at zero, or near zero, then balanced bilingualism is established. This facility is also referred to as equilingualism.

Sociolinguists will talk frequently about ‘additive’ and ‘subtractive’ bilingualism, both of which are attended by subjectivity and may have a bearing in the emerging debate here in Ireland. ‘Additive’ bilingualism is when a society sees another language as a high-status entity, a type of academic or social enrichment for the learner. On the other hand, ‘subtractive’ bilingualism is connected with the denigration of ethnic or cultural values, emanating from a decline in the status of a language and its gradual replacement by a more powerful one.

In speaking of the replacement of one language by another, it is also worth mentioning transient and static bilingualism. The former characterises a temporary stage in the use of one or other language exclusively: the latter characterises a situation in which the language-frontier has remained stable for a long period with notable numbers of bilingual people on both sides of it. Another term that is met in this area is diglossia and is frequently used interchangeably with bilingualism. Fishman (1968) distinguishes between the two:

*“Bilingualism is essentially a characterization of individual linguistic versatility while diglossia is a characterization of the societal allocation of functions to different languages ...”*

In other words, psychologists and psycholinguists talk about bilingualism while sociologists and sociolinguists will use the term diglossia.

All of the above draws attention to the fact that a consideration of bilingualism is not straightforward and, in talking about it, people may very well themselves be speaking in a sort of divers tongues and with divergent conceptualisations in mind. In the context of language teaching in Irish schools, therefore, it is necessary to agree frameworks so that the debate can go forward in an informed and agreed manner.

## **BILINGUALISM, INTELLIGENCE AND COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING**

Early research on bilingualism and intelligence lacked validity due to flaws within the body of research. Unsatisfactory sampling techniques and lack of control over variables led to results that were spurious in the conclusions they drew. Towards the end of the nineteen-fifties, W.R. Jones (1959) argued that, if social class was controlled, bilingualism had a neutral effect on non-verbal IQ. This neutralism persisted for a few years until the renowned research of Peal and Lambert (1962). Although this work was shown later to be blemished, it did mark the resolute assertion of the belief among many that bilingualism could positively affect cognitive functioning. However, because of the extensive raft of components that are involved in the consideration of intelligence, it probably cannot be said with any great certitude that the effects are positive, negative or neutral. In other words, the case still appears to be unproven.

Results in the cognitive functioning area, however, show a greater gravitas and tend to give cause for more optimism amidst the proponents of bilingualism. In the use of IQ tests, the subject of the test is directed in the pursuit of one correct answer, thereby exhibiting the process of 'convergent thinking'. Divergent thinking, on the other hand, is more creative, imaginative and open-ended. It involves a search for a number of fits for a particular conundrum. For example, a pupil might be asked to list as many uses as possible for a plastic carton. There is a substantial corpus of international research that compares the abilities of monolinguals and bilinguals in divergent thinking (Anisfeld, 1964; Torrance et al, 1970; Cummins and Gullutsan, 1974; Landry, 1974; Cummins, 1975; Noble and Dalton, 1976; Cummins, 1977).

A majority of the research findings would indicate that bilinguals will out-perform monolinguals in the areas of divergent thinking. Scott (1973), however, states the case for a two-way causal connection, ie that bilingualism is both the donor of and the beneficiary from divergent thinking skills. Even if this were to be the case, it would still give cause for satisfaction and would detract little from the validity of the evidence that has a bearing on this connection. Baker (1988) succinctly weighs the case by concluding:

*“There is insufficient evidence to satisfy the sceptic, but what evidence there is leads in the direction of supporting the believers in bilingualism” (p.44)*

## **BILINGUALISM AND MOTIVATION**

Human activity is shaped in many and disparate ways, deriving from a wide panoply of desire, impetus or force. Psychologists frequently ascribe the term 'motivation' to this inner impulsion, and few factors could claim to be closer to the central or critical aspects of the whole question of bilingualism.

In looking at that connection between motivation and bilingualism, the research of Laing (1988) is interesting in the context of 'once-removed motivation', ie. the motivation of parents who place their children in a bilingual milieu. This may very well have implications for the progress of the Irish system in times to come, as well as illuminating the faltering pathways of times past.

Laing's study of two decades of immersion bilingual education reflects on the Canadian experience that began with the St Lambert project in Quebec in 1965. Two decades later, there were more than 140,000 students enrolled in immersion programmes in over a thousand elementary and secondary schools. These immersion programmes started and prospered in the face of stern opposition from several influential lobbies in the Canadian educational mainstream that maintained, as Macnamara's (1966) research (although much critiqued since) had indicated, that second language attainment is usually paid for at the expense of the first.

So, why then did the programmes have such prodigious success in Canada? The main reason would seem to be that they were, almost without exception, voluntary. Hence, the ingredient of once-removed parent motivation was vibrant and very influential. Weighing on these parents was the knowledge that the other language in the Canadian system would provide enriched opportunities for their offspring in a country where bilingualism was a prerequisite for advancement in the government service and for career-progression in most of the major national corporations. Most of the adults were quick to admit frustration, even inner fury at their own inability to follow a basic conversation in the other national language, though they had studied it for years as a second language. They thus wanted to see their children spend a more fructue time at language learning in school and many were, moreover, committed to a bilingual and bicultural Canada. Others were merely satisfied that their children were emerging as something special, namely bilinguals. There may be similar motivational factors behind the phenomenal growth in gael scoileanna in the last twenty years in Ireland.

A further aspect of motivation in the bilingual sphere seeks to establish what type of motive is the main impetus for an individual who is undertaking the study of a second or further language. Gardner and Lambert (1972) introduced the concept of instrumental and integrative motivation in an attempt to address the eternal conundrum of why some people undertake the learning of a language with great facility while others continue to founder, despite getting comparable opportunities for

mastery. Notwithstanding the fact that ability and aptitude play their part, the varieties that Gardner and Lambert delineated showed a two-pronged thrust. Instrumental motivation is marked by an underlying pragmatism, such as the acquisition of a good job, promotion, or a salary-rise. It is therefore non-social and individualistic. Integrative motivation, on the other hand, is a socially oriented impetus that drives a person to learn another language in order to belong to a group, or be accepted or liked by that group. Gardner and Lambert believed that integrative motivation was likely to be more influential for, they contend, personal commitments and relationships are more likely to survive the sheer pragmatic endgame of instrumental motivation. If one is to accept, even to a relatively small degree, that there is validity in what they claim then one needs to examine what exactly are the implications for the bilingual education system in Ireland, where neither paradigm might be in evidence. In the last analysis, primary teachers might find themselves delivering a commodity or entity that the learner is neither greatly motivated to take on, nor which has the luxury of basking in the comfort of the once-removed motivational thrust from parents either. What chance success if this is the case?

## **CHOICES AND CHALLENGES**

It will soon be time for primary practitioners in Irish schools to face into this issue of bilingualism/ multilingualism and the question most often on lips concerns the ‘full-box’ nature of the revised curriculum, viz. how can more be crammed into an already overflowing vessel. Many may now be of the opinion that, if the democratic choice were given to parents, a majority would opt for a lessening of curricular time at Gaeilge and a commensurate increase in time given to modern languages. Has the time come to address this question, to ask those stakeholders that serious question about the type of bilingual education they want for their children?

With close on two million learning hours undertaken each week by Irish primary school children in Gaeilge, one can extrapolate that roughly two billion pupil hours will be given in the next quarter century by the next generation of teachers to the implementation of the Gaeilge curriculum. Will the State, one might wonder, be just about as far along the road to language revival then as it is now, after labouring for the best part of the last century? Teachers are probably a bit tired by now of being the sole life-support system to our native tongue, though recent developments such as TG4 are welcome, if not a little late. Is it time to stand up and proclaim that the language is dead, that it is really time now for a decent and respectful burial, perhaps somewhere in the groves of academe?

By the same token, if bilingual education delivery is modified, is there anything to

suggest that modern languages will take hold with any greater facility? Perhaps it is the case that Irish citizens are satisfied being Anglophones and that they do not want to spend time and energy learning other languages when they already possess English, one of the world's most dominant languages. Would Irish educators be better employed investing time in science or technology education, or will Irish society lose forever the heritage that is uniquely ours, as Cornish and Manx did before us.

Whatever road is taken, there would seem to be a serious need presently for some reflection and debate on the issue of language in Irish society and in the Irish education system. Should schools expand their bilingual remit and strike out along the road towards achieving a nation of polyglots, garnering in the process whatever attendant cognitive benefits there are? Almost a century ago, Synge wrote that there was "no language like the Irish for soothing and quieting". The question now could be: just how many of our people know enough to be able to empathise with him and, after the next quarter century of toil in the classroom, when the next revision of curriculum comes along, will that number have grown or shrunk. The following chapters on Gaelge and modern languages in the curriculum consider some aspects of this debate.



# An Ghaeilge sa Bhunscoil

## A. AN CURACLAM GAEILGE

### Réamhrá

Aithníonn an t-Acht Oideachais 1998 go bhfuil ról, ach ról teoranta, ag Bun Scoileanna na tíre seo maidir le caomhnú agus cur chun cinn na Gaeilge. Mar atá leagtha amach i Mír 6 den Acht, ní mór do gach duine a bhfuil a baint aige nó aice leis an Acht a chur i ngníomh, aird a bheith aige nó aice ar chuspóirí an Achta a bhfuil iad seo a leanas ina measc:

- 1 cuidiú le réadú beartas agus cuspóirí náisiúnta i ndáil le leathadh an dátheangachais i sochaí na hÉireann agus go háirithe go mbainfí úsáid níos mó as an nGaeilge ar scoil agus sa phobal;
- 1 cuidiú leis an nGaeilge a choinneáil mar phríomhtheanga an phobail i limistéir Ghaeltachta;
- 1 riachtanais teanga agus chultúrtha mac léinn a chur chun cinn ag féachaint do roghanna a dtuismitheoirí.

Chomh maith leis sin, de réir Mír 9 den Acht, áirítear é mar fheidhm ag scoil:

- 1 forbairt na Gaeilge agus thraidisiúin na hÉireann, litríocht na hÉireann, na healaíona agus nithe cultúrtha eile, a chur chun cinn
- 1 i gcás scoileanna atá lonnaithe i limistéar Gaeltachta, cuidiú leis an nGaeilge a choinneáil mar phríomhtheanga an phobail.

Traidisiún lárnach in oideachas na hÉireann é go bhfoghlaímíonn gach páiste bunscoile dhá theanga ó thus na scolaíochta. Bíonn an Ghaeilge le múineadh sna scoileanna mar theanga bheo cumarsáide. Ach ní leor an Ghaeilge a bheith á foghlaim ar scoil. Is gá don phobal tacaíocht a thabhairt d'obair na scoile má tá páistí le bheith dátheangach ar fhágáil na bunscoile dóibh, is é sin, má ghlactar leis gur cuspóir de chuid an Stáit é an dátheangachas a chur chun cinn.

Ní ualach é an dátheangachas do dhuine ar bith. Treisíonn an dátheangachas forbairt chognaíoch agus shóisialta an pháiste. Cuireann an dátheangachas le cumas an pháiste dearcadh breise a bheith aige/aici ar an saol. Tig leis an bpáiste dul i ngleic le dhá chóras fuaime, dhá chóras gramadaí, agus le dhá chóras foclóra. Cuireann an dátheangachas chomh maith le cumas an pháiste smaoineamh dibhéirseach a bheith aige/aici, le forbairt coincheapa, agus lena c(h)umas teangacha eile a fhoghlaim ar ball.

I múineadh agus foghlaim teangacha tá sé fíortháthachtach go mbeidh cur amach ag an bhfoghlaiméoir ar an dteanga í féin agus ar an gcultúr as an n-eascaíonn sí. Déantar freastal ar *Feasacht Teanga agus Feasacht Cultúir* sa churaclam nua don Ghaeilge.

#### FEASACHT TEANGA

Déanann an múinteoir aird an pháiste a dhíriú ar an nGaeilge, ar na pátrúin nó ar na struchtúir éagsúla atá inti. Spreagtar an páiste chun smaoineamh níos doimhne a dhéanamh ar an teanga, agus chun na cosúlachtaí agus na difríochtaí atá idir an Ghaeilge agus an Béarla agus idir an Ghaeilge agus teangacha eile a aimsiú agus a phlé. Cuirtear béim ar thuiscint a fháil ar an nGaeilge sa timpeallacht, i log ainmneacha agus sloinnté na ndaoine.

#### FEASACHT CULTÚIR

Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh tuiscint ag na páistí ar ghnéithe d'fheasacht chultúr na hÉireann – is é sin go mbeadh eolasa acu ar oidhreacht na hÉireann (nádúrtha agus tógtha), agus go mbeadh eolas acu ar chluichí Gaelacha, ar cheol, ar rincí agus ar an traidisiún béil agus scríofa. Cuirfear san áireamh freisin cultúr na tíre nach mbaineann go díreach leis an nGaeilge. (Curaclam na Bunscoile 1999)

### **Struchtúr an Churaclaim**

Ta ábhar teagaisc agus foghlama an churaclaim Gaeilge eagraithe faoi cheithre shnáithe:

- 1 Éisteacht
- 1 Labhairt
- 1 Léitheoireacht
- 1 Scríbhneoireacht

Tá gach snáithe acu roinnte ina shnáithaonaid. Cé go bhfuil na snáitheanna scartha óna chéile tá sé i gceist go mbeidís comhtháite chomh minic agus is féidir sa cheacht Gaeilge. Tá béim an-láidir á chur ar labhairt na Gaeilge sa churaclam. Tá na scileanna teanga ‘éisteacht’ agus ‘labhairt’ fite fuaite ar a chéile i bhfoghlaim teanga. Nuair a

thosaítear ar an scríbhneoireacht agus ar an léitheoireacht is cóir dóibh tacú leis an nGaeilge ó bhéal. Moltar mar sin na ceithre scil teanga a shníomh le chéile ar bhealaí éagsúla sna tascanna a bheidh le déanamh, de réir mar a oireann don rang.

Cuid lárnach den phróiseas teagaisc agus foghlama é an measúnú. Moltar sa churaclam Gaeilge uirlisí measúnaithe a roghnú agus a úsáid a oireann do na páistí agus do chúinsí an ranga. Seo a leanas roinnt de na huirlisí measúnaithe ar féidir leas a bhaint astu chun dul chun cinn na bpáistí a mheas:

- 1 Dír bhreathnú an mhúinteora ar an bpáiste.
- 1 Tascanna agus trialacha deartha ag an múinteoir.
- 1 Bailiúchán d’obair agus de thionscadail an pháiste.
- 1 Próifílí curaclaim.
- 1 Trialacha diagnóiseacha.
- 1 Trialacha caighdeánaithe (CNCM 1999, l. 146).

Déanann an Curaclam Gaeilge freastal ar na cinéalacha éagsúla scoile atá ann agus ar na cúinsí difriúla atá le fáil iontu. Tugtar aitheantas do scoileanna na Gaeltachta agus do na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge (scoileanna T1) – is í an Ghaeilge an gnáth-theanga cumarsáide laethúil sna scoileanna seo agus teanga teagaisc na n-ábhar go léir seachas Béarla. Tugtar aitheantas chomh maith do na scoileanna ina múintear an Ghaeilge mar dhara teanga (scoileanna T2). Is é an Béarla an teanga teagaisc ar an iomlán i scoileanna T2 ach múintear gnéithe eile den churaclam trí mheán na Gaeilge ó am go ham.

Cé go bhfuil an Curaclam Gaeilge roinnte i ndá chuid, an chéad chuid do scoileanna T2 agus an dara chuid do scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lánGhaeilge (scoileanna T1), ní hionann é sin is a rá go bhfuil na scoileanna go léir sna haicmí éagsúla thuas mar a chéile ó thaobh teanga de. Ní bheadh sé i gceist go gcuirfí teorainn le forbairt na teanga i scoileanna T2 agus ar an dtaobh eile tharlódh sé go mbeadh dúshlán ann gach cuspóir atá molta a bhaint amach i gach scoil Ghaeltachta agus lánGhaeilge i ngeall ar chúlra teanga na bpáistí.

## **Scoileanna Gaeltachta agus Lán-Ghaeilge**

Is gá do pháistí sna scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lánGhaeilge caighdeán níos airde a shroichint sa Ghaeilge i gcomparáid le páistí i scoileanna T2, mar gur gá dóibh dul i ngleic leis na hábhair eile go léir trí Ghaeilge. Chun a riachtanais teanga agus foghlama a shásamh tá réimse níos leithne agus níos cuimsithí d’fheidhmeanna teanga le déanamh ag na páistí sna scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lánGhaeilge. Bheifí ag súil le cumas cainte, le líofacht, agus le cruinneas i bhfíorócaidí cumarsáide. Tá réimse níos leithne de chuspóirí ábhair leagtha amach do na páistí i Scoileanna Gaeltachta agus

lánGhaeilge chomh maith, mar gur gá a chinntiú go mbíonn forbairt chognaíoch tré mheán na Gaeilge á fáil ag na páistí. Is gá freisin a chinntiú go gcuirfí ar chumas an pháiste é/í féin a chur in iúl agus a c(h)uid samhlaíochta agus mothúcháin a léiriú tré mheán na Gaeilge. Tarlaíonn comhtháthú nádúrtha idir na hábhair eile agus an Ghaeilge sna scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lán-Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeilge in úsáid mar theanga teagaisc. Déantar saibhriú ar an nGaeilge idir fhoclóir agus struchtúir tríd an leathnú úsáide. Tá béim faoi leith ar shuibhreas teanga agus aithnítear an tábhacht a bhaineann leis na canúintí éagsúla. Déantar idirdhealú maidir le mórchanúintí agus lárchanúintí, agus leagtar béim ar an ról atá ag scoileanna Gaeltachta maidir le cothú agus caomhnú na gcanúintí éagsúla.

Tá an Gúm, le tacaíocht ón Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta, tar éis Cúrsa Comhtháite Gaeilge – Séideán Sí – a fhoilsiú do Ranganna na Naíonán i scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lánGhaeilge, chun freastal ar ghánna agus riachtanais teanga na bpáistí sna scoileanna úd. Tá clár cuimsitheach réamh léitheoireachta agus scríbhneoireachta leagtha amach do na naíonáin shóisearacha. Sa scéim teagaisc úd táthar ag súil go mbeadh na naíonáin shóisearacha in ann tabhairt faoi léitheoireacht spleách ón Cháisc ar aghaidh. Tugtar faoin léitheoireacht neamhspleách trí mheán na Gaeilge sna naíonáin shinsearacha. Ar nós scoileanna T2, tá béim faoi leith curtha ar scil na héisteachta agus labhairt na teanga sna ranganna naíonáin sna scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lánGhaeilge. Chun freastal cóir agus níos iomláine a dhéanamh ar riachtanais an oideachais trí mheán na Gaeilge is gá a thuilleadh áiseanna ar nós Séideán Sí a sholáthar go luath do gach rang. Tá pacáistí foghlama curtha le chéile ag na comhluchtaí foilsiúcháin freisin chun freastal ar mhúineadh na Gaeilge i scoileanna T2, agus tá réimse níos leithne ábhar ar fáil anois ná mar a bhíodh.

## **An Ghaeilge i gComhthéacs na Scoile**

Chun deis a thabhairt do na páistí an Ghaeilge atá foghlamtha acu a chleachtadh ar bhealach nádúrtha agus a úsáid go cumarsáideach, moltar an Ghaeilge a úsáid lasmuigh den cheacht fhoirmiúil i gcomhthéacs an tseomra ranga agus na scoile, de réir mar a oireann. Moltar sa churaclam Gaeilge an scoil a chothú mar comhthéacs cumarsáide d'úsáid na Gaeilge. Tig le pobal na scoile an Ghaeilge a úsáid sa scoil agus sa seomra ranga mar theanga caidrimh agus mar theanga bainisteoireachta. Bíonn suíomh réalaíoch ar fáil do na páistí, cibé Gaeilge atá acu, an teanga a chleachtadh go nádúrtha. Moladh eile atá ann ná am a chur ar leataobh go laethúil, ar nós am rolla nó am lóin, agus Gaeilge amháin a úsáid ag na hamanna úd. Chun suim na dtuismitheoirí a spreagadh sa Ghaeilge tig le páistí frása na seachtaine a úsáid sa scoil agus sa bhaile.

## Cur Chuige Cumarsáideach

Bhíodh béim níos mó ar an ngramadach agus ar struchtúr na teanga, sular cuireadh an curaclam nua don Ghaeilge le chéile. Cé gur múineadh an teanga trí ‘chomhrá’ agus gur baineadh úsáid as pictiúir/léaráidí agus stiall scannáin níor éirigh leis an gcur chuige úd scileanna cumarsáide sa teanga a thabhairt don bhfoghlaim. Tá an curaclam nua Gaeilge bunaithe ar Chur Chuige Cumarsáideach atá páiste lárnach.

Ní modh múinte atá i gceist le cur chuige cumarsáideach. Bainfidh múinteoirí úsáid as modhanna éagsúla de réir mar oireann, ach tá sé intuigthe gurb í an Ghaeilge a úsáidtear mar theanga teagaisc sa cheacht Gaeilge. Ciallaíonn cumarsáid daoine ag éisteacht agus ag labhairt lena chéile, daoine ag scríobh chuig a chéile, ag léamh an ábhair scríbhneoireachta sin, agus ag freagairt dó. Braitheann an cineál cumarsáide a thiteann amach idir daoine ar an ról atá acu sa saol agus ar an suíomh ina bhfuil an chumarsáid ar siúl. Prionsabail agus fealsúnacht, seachas modheolaíocht, atá ag baint le cur chuige cumarsáideach.

Agus cur chuige cumarsáideach in úsáid sa rang, bíonn cumarsáid mar sprioc i gcónaí; bíonn sé i gcroí lár an phróiseas foghlama agus teagaisc. Cuirtear béim faoi leith ar scileanna labhartha teanga a fhoghlaim ar bhealach nádúrtha agus comhtháite trí éagsúlacht straitéisí agus modhanna múinte a úsáid. Déantar suíomh a chruthú a chothaíonn féin-mhuinín an fhoghlaimora agus a chuireann lena fhonn an sprioc theanga a úsáid. Is gá cuspóirí réadúla agus dúshlán atá insroichte a bheith leagtha amach don fhoghlaimoir má tá a f(h)éin-iontaibh le caomhnú.

### SEO A LEANAS NA PRÍOMH THRÉITHE A BHAINNEANN LE CUR CHUIGE CUMARSÁIDEACH.

- 1 *Tá sé foghlaimoir lárnach* – Dírítear ar riachtanais teanga agus foghlama an fhoghlaimora.
- 1 *Ábhar tarraingteach agus taitneamhach don fhoghlaimoir* – Is cóir dlúthbhaint a bheith ag an ábhar teagaisc agus foghlama le saol agus suim an pháiste. Tugann sé sin deis d’fhoghlaimoirí tarraingt ar a dtáthí féin, a gcuid tuairimí a nochtadh, agus a samhlaíocht a úsáid.
- 1 *Comhthéacsanna réalaiócha* – Is gá comhthéacs a chothú d’úsáid na teanga le linn an cheachta fhoirmiúil agus lasmuigh de i rith an lae.
- 1 *Ionchur teanga* – Is gá teanga a fháil ón mhúinteoir nó ó ábhar taifeada mar ullmhuchán don chumarsáid, agus don tasc a bheidh le déanamh ag an bhfoghlaimoir.
- 1 *Béim ar thascanna agus ar ghníomhaíochtaí* – Tascanna á ndéanamh agus cuspóir cinnte ag gach ceacht.
- 1 *Feidhmeanna teanga a chomhlíonadh* – Mar shampla ceist a chur ar dhuine, freagra le tabhairt srl.

1. *Bearna san eolas* – Ba chóir go mbeadh gá agus fáth ag an bhfoghlaimeoir an teanga atá foghlamtha a úsáid sa cheacht. Socraíonn an múinteoir go mbeidh gá ag an bhfoghlaimeoir eolas a fháil nó a thabhairt do dhuine eile. Nuair a bhíonn malartú eolais ar bun bíonn fíor-chumarsáid ar siúl.
1. *Cumarsáid mar sprioc i ngach ceacht* – Na ceithre scil teanga (éisteacht, labhairt, léamh, scríobh) a shníomh le chéile agus a úsáid go nádúrtha chomh fada agus is féidir.
1. *Idir theanga* – Féachtar ar earráidí mar chuid den phróiseas foghlama agus tá ról faoi leith ag an múinteoir suíomh sabháilte a chothú agus a chruthú ina mbeidh an foghlaimeoir sásta dul sa tseans cibé teanga atá aige/aici a úsáid go cumarsáideach.

## Na Feidhmeanna Teanga

Tugtar feidhm teanga ar an úsáid a bhaineann duine as teanga chun cuspóir éigin cumarsáide a bhaint amach. Déantar na feidhmeanna teanga a rangú sna sé mhór chatagóir seo a leanas:

1. Caidreamh sóisialta a dhéanamh.
2. Eolas a thabhairt agus a lorg.
3. Dearcadh a léiriú agus a lorg.
4. Dul i gcion ar dhuine.
5. Struchtúr a chur ar chomhrá.
6. Soiléiriú a lorg i gcomhrá

Sa Churaclam tá na sé chatagóir thuas roinnte ina mion-fheidhmeanna. Is faoi gach scoil atá sé eiseamláirí na bhfeidhmeanna a roghnú agus a eagrú do na rang ghrúpaí éagsúla, ag cinntiú go bhfuil leanúnachas agus forbairt ann ó rang ghrúpa go rang ghrúpa. Séard atá i gceist le heiseamláir ná an frása a úsáidtear chun feidhm teanga a bhaint amach. Mar shampla, chun beannú do dhuine (feidhm teanga), úsáidtear an t-eiseamláir “Dia Duit”. Ní féidir eiseamláirí a úsáid i bhfolús, agus mar sin, chun freastal a dhéanamh ar spéis na bpáistí, tá deich gcinn de théamaí liostaithe sa churaclam. Cothaíonn na téamaí comhthéacsanna réalaíocha d’úsáid agus do mhúineadh eiseamláirí na bhfeidhmeanna teanga sa cheacht Gaeilge. Is gá fo-théamaí a roghnú do gach rang ghrúpa a thagann le spéis na bpáistí agus a chinntiú go bhfuil éagsúlacht maidir le hábhar agus eispéaras foghlama ag na páistí ó bhliain go bliain. Ní mór na téamaí/na fo-théamaí éagsúla agus eiseamláirí na bhfeidhmeanna a chomhtháthú le chéile i dtascanna, i ngníomhaíochtaí, agus i gcluichí cumarsáideacha sa cheacht Gaeilge.

## Ceachtanna Cumarsáide

Bheadh na gnéithe seo a leanas le sonrú i gceacht cumarsáide:

- 1 Caint nádúrtha – Is leor agus uaireanta is gá freagra gairid a thabhairt chomh maith le stadanna agus abairtí easnamhacha.
- 1 Idirtheanga – Go minic bheadh an chaint míchruinn ó thaobh na gramadaí de.
- 1 An teanga in úsáid ar mhaithe le heolas a thabhairt nó a lorg - Bheadh an duine ag iarraidh cuspóir éigin cumarsáide a bhaint amach.

Tá an ceacht cumarsáideach roinnte i dtrí thréimhse. Ba chóir don chumarsáid a bheith mar sprioc i ngach ceacht, sé sin le rá go mbeidh gá ag an bhfoghlaimoir an teanga atá á foghlaim aice/aige a úsáid go cumarsáideach le linn an cheachta. Sa chéad chuid den cheacht, **an tréimhse réamhchumarsáide**, leagtar béim ar fhoghlaim na teanga don tasc-chluiche. Bíonn an páiste ag cleachtadh na teanga chun go mbeidh sé/sí in ann feidhm a bhaint aisti ar ball. Sa **tréimhse cumarsáide** tagann athrú ar ról an pháiste agus ar ról an mhúinteora. De réir mar a théann an ceacht ar aghaidh bíonn níos mó cainte á dhéanamh ag na páistí agus bíonn béim ar ghníomhaíochtaí, ar chluichí, nó ar thascanna. Bíonn an múinteoir ann mar chomhairleoir ag soláthar freagra nó focal anseo is ansiúd ar mhaithe na cumarsáide. Ní moltar cur isteach ar chaint agus ar chumarsáid le hearráidí a ghlanadh. Is féidir a leithéid a cheartú níos déanaí sa tríú tréimhse den cheacht, **an tréimhse iarchumarsáide**. Sa tréimhse iarchumarsáide téitear siar ar ábhar an cheachta, agus féachtar leis an eolas a thraschur go tascanna nó go cluichí eile.

Próiseas leanúnach is ea na tréimhsí cumarsáide agus tá sé le tuiscint gurb é an rud is tábhachtaí ná na páistí a chur ag caint agus i mbun cumarsáide go luath agus chomh minic agus is féidir. Moltar obair bheirte nó obair ghrúpaí a chur ar bun sa rang sa chaoi is go mbeidh deis ag gach páiste sa rang teanga a chleachtadh agus a labhairt. Sna ranganna naíonán seans nach mbeadh morán obair bheirte ar siúl ag an tús, ach tá sé riachtanach sna ranganna seo go mbeadh ionchur saibhir teanga ón múinteoir agus/nó ó ábhar taifeada i bhfoirm rainn, gníomh-amhráin, gníomhartha coirp, drámaí beaga, agus cluichí teanga as Gaeilge.

## Straitéisí agus Modhanna Múinte

Chun deis a thabhairt do gach páiste cumarsáid a dhéanamh sa cheacht, chun suim na bpáistí a spreagadh, agus chun freastal ar riachtanais éagsúla foghlama na bpáistí ní mór don mhúinteoir úsáid a bhaint as réimse leathan straitéisí agus é/í i mbun na Gaeilge a mhúineadh. Bíonn sé de chuspóir ag an múinteoir comhthéacs taitneamhach a chruthú d'úsáid na Gaeilge ionas go mbeidh deis ag na páistí an Ghaeilge a úsáid. Is iad na straitéisí na huirlisí a bhíonn ag múinteoirí chun suíomh cumarsáide

a chruthú agus a chothú. Seo a leanas na straitéisí is coitianta atá molta sa churaclam (CNCM 1999, l. 67):

- 1 Agallaimh mar ionchur d'imir i rólanna.
- 1 Cluichí teanga.
- 1 Tascanna agus fadhbanna.
- 1 Druileanna.
- 1 Drámaíocht.
- 1 Físeáin.
- 1 Scéalaíocht.
- 1 Filíocht: rainn, dánta agus amhráin, rathlóga, tomhais, seanfhocail agus tréanna.

Is éard is brí le modh múinte ná an bealach a eagraíonn an múinteoir an t-ábhar teagaisc agus foghlama agus a chuireann sé/sí i láthair na bpáistí é. Is faoi gach múinteoir atá sé modhanna múinte a roghnú agus a úsáid a oireann dó/di, don ábhar teagaisc agus do riachtanais foghlama na bpáistí sa rang. Seo a leanas na modhanna is suntasaí ar féidir feidhm a bhaint astu:

- 1 An modh díreach.
- 1 Modh na sraithe.
- 1 Modh na lánfhreagartha gníomhaí.
- 1 An modh closlabhartha.
- 1 An modh closamhairc.
- 1 Modh na ráite (CNCM 1999, l. 64).

Cibé modh a roghaíonn an múinteoir ní mór do na páistí a bheith gníomhach san fhoghlaim agus caithfear béim a chur ar úsáid na gcéadfaí go léir. Oireann modhanna áirithe do thréimhsí éagsúla an cheachta, ach pé acu modh a úsáideann an múinteoir is í an Ghaeilge an meán teagaisc chun foclóir agus eiseamláirí na bhfeidhmeanna a mhíniú do na páistí.

## B. ANAILÍS AR THAIGHDE CHUMANN MÚINTEOIRÍ ÉIREANN I SCOILEANNA T1

### Réamhrá

Thosaigh cúrsaí inseirbhíse don Churaclam nua Gaeilge do na scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lán-Ghaeilge (scoileanna T1) sa scoilbhliain 1999–2000. Is fiú a rá gur chuir an t-easpa áiseanna do na scoileanna seo isteach go mór ar chur i bhfeidhm an churaclaim ó shoin. Thosaigh cúrsaí inseirbhíse sa Ghaeilge do scoileanna T2 sa scoilbhliain 2000–2001.

Chinn Coiste Oideachais Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann taighde a dhéanamh ar conas mar a bhí ag éirí le scoileanna an curaclaim nua Gaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm. Cinneadh an chéad chéim den taighde a theorannú do scoileanna na Gaeltachta agus na scoileanna lánGhaeilge, ó tharla nár thosaigh scoileanna T2 ar an gcuraclam a chur i bhfeidhm go dtí an scoilbhliain 2002 / 2003 i gcás na naíonán agus 2003 / 2004 i gcás na n-ardranganna. Eagraíodh fócas-ghrúpaí le trí ghrúpa múinteoirí as scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus le trí ghrúpa múinteoirí as scoileanna Gaeltachta. Tá achoimre ar an eolas a bailíodh thíos.

### Straitéisí Teagaisc

Ag eascairt as an bplé a rinneadh sna Grúpaí Fócais dealraíonn sé gurb iad seo a leanas na straitéisí is mó atá in úsáid ag oidí Gaeltachta agus scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge:

- 1 Drámaíocht.
- 1 Ról ghlacadh.
- 1 Nuacht phearsanta mar scéal.
- 1 Filíocht.
- 1 Cluichí.

Thagair go leor oidí don easnamh atá ann maidir le háiseanna cuí do mhúineadh na Gaeilge. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Níl an oiread sin cluichí teanga sa Ghaeilge le taobh an Bhéarla. Bíonn tú ag iarraidh iad a aistriú agus ní thagann siad amach go maith.”*

Is léir go bhfuil an-tuiscint agus an-tacaíocht ann don chur chuige comhtháite i Scoileanna Gaeltachta agus lán-Ghaeilge. Mhóthaigh go leor oidí gur tharla an comhtháthú go nádúrtha le linn an teagaisc. Thacaigh siad freisin leis an gcur chuige cumarsáideach, mar is léir ón ráiteas seo a leanas:

*Bhí sé iontach a fheiceáil má labhraíonn tú le páistí faoin rud ina gcuireann siad féin suim, agus má fhorbraíonn tú é tríd scéalta agus dánta, agus na hábhair eile go speisialta, cuireann sé sin forbairt iontach orthu.*

Thagair go leor don tábhacht a bhaineann le cothú scil na héisteachta. Ba léir gur shíl go leor oidí gur constaic don chur chuige comhtháite an t-easpa áiseanna teagaisc do mhúineadh na Gaeilge, go háirithe do na hardranganna. Bhí tuairimí láidre i measc múinteoirí go raibh éagóir á dhéanamh ar dhaltaí mar nach raibh go leor áiseanna cuí ann a thagann le spéis na bpáistí, a shásaíonn na canúintí ar fad, agus le caighdeán saibhir Gaeilge iontu. Mar iarracht an t-easnamh úd a shárú ba mhinic do roinnt múinteoirí úsáid a bhaint as TG4 agus Radio na Gaeltachta. Bhí roinnt múinteoirí ann nár úsáid na meáin úd riamh ach a bhí go láidir den tuairim gur chóir do na meáin úd cláracha speisialta a sholáthar do scoileanna. I gcoitinne ba sna scoileanna Gaeltachta ba mhó a bhí an fhadhb a bhain leis na canúintí. Shíl na hoidí go raibh sé tábhachtach go mbeadh ábhar éisteachta agus léitheoireachta ar fáil do ghasúir in a gcanúint féin. Léirigh oide amháin an deacracht mar seo a leanas:

*“Nuair a bhíonn tú ag léamh leabhar amach as Gaeilge do pháistí, ní hiad na focail sa leabhar a bhíonn á léamh agat, bíonn tú ag cur do chuid focal féin air. Dá léifeá an scéal mar a bhí sé sa leabhar, ní bheadh a fhios acu caidé a bhí tú ag caint faoi.”*

Bhí roinnt oidí buartha freisin go raibh nathanna cainte a bhain lena gceantar á gcailliúint ag na páistí toisc nach raibh said sna leabhair. Ní bhíonn frásaí ar nós “cha bhfaca mé sin”, scríofa sna leabhair. Sna gaelscoileanna bhí oidí den tuairim go ndeachaigh daltaí i dtaithí ar chanúintí éagsúla tríd an éisteacht. Maidir le múineadh na gramadaí, tá na hoidí den tuairim go gcaithfear é a dhéanamh, mar luaigh oide amháin:

*“Cé gur síorlíofacht agus síorchumarsáid atá tú ag iarraidh a spreagadh, bíonn ort an-chuid den seanobair gramadaí, mar a thugtar air, a dhéanamh leo freisin, mar ní bhíonn cruinneas acu muna ndéanann tú é sin.”*

## **Riachtanais Speisialta**

I gcoitinne bhí oidí den tuairim go raibh siad in ann freastal a dhéanamh ar pháistí le fabhanna foghlama. De ghnáth níorbh é an teanga féin ba chúis leis na deacrachtaí foghlama dar leis na hoidí. Agus cé go mbíonn deacrachtaí foghlama ag daltaí sa Ghaeilge, sa Bhéarla, nó sa Mhatamaitic, bíonn siad in ann Gaeilge a labhairt agus a thuiscint. Cháin go leor an t-easnamh uirlisí measúnaithe ag rá nach bhfuil trialacha diagnóiseacha nó trialacha caighdeánaithe ar fáil as Gaeilge. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Is dóigh liom gurb é ceann de na teachtaireachtaí is tábhachtaí go mba cheart a*

*thabhairt go bhfuil sé dochreidthe go bhfuil muid mar dhaoine proifisiúnta ag iarraidh feidhmú go fóill gan na slait tomhais chearta again chun páistí atá i mbaol a mheas i gceart”.*

Is pointe an-tábhachtach é seo toisc go bhfuil béim níos mó ar chúrsaí measúnaithe sa churaclam athbhreithnithe. Luaigh na hoidí freisin nach ndéantar tagairt do riachtanais dhaltaí Gaeltachta/gaelscoileanna i gcúrsaí d’oidí tacaíochta foghlama nó d’oidí riachtanais speisialta.

Ceist an-chasta go deo í deacrachtaí foghlama sna scoileanna Gaeltachta. Bhí na hoidí sna ceantair seo go láidir den tuairim go dteastaíonn polasaí cinnte maidir le rogha teanga ó thaobh gasúir le fadhbanna foghlama agus nach raibh aon treoir cheart ar fáil. I gcásanna áirithe b’fhearr leis na tuismitheoirí go ndíreofaí ar an mBéarla seachas ar an nGaeilge, ach ní raibh na hoidí uile sásta gurb é sin an rogha ceart i gcónaí. Bhíodar den tuairim go mbraithfeadh sé ar an gcineál deacrachtaí foghlama a bhí i gceist, an teanga a bhí sa bhaile, agus leanúnachas go dtí an dara leibhéal. Maidir le páistí Gaeltachta le fadhbanna teanga ba chúis gearáin agus uafáis é nach raibh seirbhís teiripe cainte ar fáil as Gaeilge. Léirigh oide amháin mar a thiontaigh teaghlach amháin a raibh togha na Gaeilge acu sa bhaile ar Bhéarla a labhairt leis an ngasúr, toisc gur Béarla a labhair an teiripe cainte leis.

## **Feidhmeanna Teanga**

Tá scoileanna ag déanamh forbairt agus athbhreithnú maidir le heiseamláirí na bhfeidhmanna teanga. Is léir go dtugtar san áireamh teanga a fheileann do riachtanais chumarsáide agus foghlama na bpáistí. Dirítear ar theanga an chlóis, ar fhrásaí na seachtaine, agus ar théamaí éagsúla i roinnt gaelscoileanna. I scoileanna eile déantar nóta de na botúin a dhéanann páistí go rialta, agus déantar ceachtanna bunaithe orthu ansin. Bhí sé le tuiscint chomh mhaith ón bplé gur próiseas leanúnach atá ann leis an obair seo. Bhí na hoidí sna gaelscoileanna sásta go mbíonn caighdeán ard labhartha ag na daltaí ar fhágáil Rang a sé dóibh, ach go raibh laigí sa litriú agus sa scríbhneoireacht. Tá sé tábhachtach a aithint go bhfuil an tuairim ann nach ndéanann an curaclam nua freastal iomlán ar scoileanna lánGhaeilge nó ar Scoileanna Gaeltachta. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Tá an-chuid ann atá go maith agus a thugann an-spreagadh ach, feicimidne atá ag feidhmiú trí mheán na Gaeilge an t-am ar fad, go bhfuil gnéithe a bhaineann leis sin agus le múineadh na teanga nach bhfuil clúdaithe. Agus táimid ag rá go bhfuil sé fíorthábhachtach tógáil ar an rud atá ann cheana féin agus ar an gcuid is dearfa dá bhfuil ann, agus é sin a fhí isteach sa churaclam praiticiúil más é sin atá a fhorbairt.”*

## Léitheoireacht

Leantar clár réamhléitheoireachta agus, don chuid is mó, bíonn léitheoireacht spléach ar siúl ag na gasúir sna naíonáin bheaga agus léitheoireacht neamhspléach sna naíonáin mhóra. Bhí imeachtaí réamhléitheoireacht ar nós cluichí focail coitianta i ranganna na naíonán. I bhfocail oide amháin:

*“Tá siad ag foghlaim scileanna léitheoireachta i nganfhiós dóibh féin mar sórt cluiche.”*

Is léir ó na fócas-ghrúpaí go bhfuil scoileanna ann a thosaigh leis an léitheoireacht Bhéarla agus leis an léitheoireacht Ghaeilge le chéile in ainneoinn an moladh atá sa churaclam gan iad a thosnú le chéile. Tá cuma ar an scéal, áfach, go mbíonn brú uaireanta ó thuismitheoirí ar an ábhar seo, fiú nuair a mhínítear polasaí na scoile. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Bhí a fhios agam go m’fhearr leo go mbeinn ag déanamh an Béarla fosta.”*

Maidir le húsáid fíor-leabhar mar ábhar léitheoireachta mhothaigh go leor nach raibh ábhar oiriúnach, a tháinig le spéis agus teanga na bpáistí, ar fáil do ghasúir, ach go háirithe sna hardranganna. Mar sin féin, dúirt na hoidí gur thaitin na fíorleabhair go mór leis na páistí ach nach raibh na cinn i nGaeilge chomh suimiúil leis na cinn i mBéarla agus go raibh sé deacair teacht ar na seanleabhair. Luadh freisin nach raibh an teanga sna leabhair saibhir go leor do dhaltaí Gaeltachta i gcónaí agus go raibh saibhreas teanga na bpáistí ag titim dá bharr. B’ábhar buartha d’oide amháin é freisin go raibh daltaí áirithe a raibh sár-Ghaeilge acu sna naíonáin, ach nár fheabhsaigh siad i rith a dtréimhse scoile, toisc nach raibh dóthain dúshláin teanga ann dóibh.

## Ceapachán Oidí

Bhí sé spéisiúil a thabhairt faoi deara nach raibh fadhb i gcoitinne, ag scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge nó ag scoileanna Gaeltachta a ghlac páirt sna fócas-ghrúpaí, oidí a fháil nuair a tháinig postanna aníos, cé gur luadh go mbíonn fadhbanna ó am go ham teacht ar ionadaithe. Dúradh, mar sin féin, go raibh sé tábhachtach a chinntiú go mbeadh soláthar múinteoirí ann i gcónaí a bheadh sásta teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge.

## Cúntóirí Teanga

Ba mhór an tacaíocht do Scoileanna Gaeltachta an córas “cúntóirí teanga” atá curtha ar fáil ag an Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta, chun freastal ar pháistí gan Ghaeilge a fhreastlaíonn ar scoileanna Gaeltachta. Agus é sin ráite, bhí an tuairim ann i measc roinnt oidí gur chóir don tseirbhís úd a bheith ar siúl in ndiaidh am scoile sa teaghlach leis na tuismitheoirí seachas i suíomh na scoile. Ar an dtaobh eile den

sceál, luaigh oide i ngaelscoil go gcuirfeadh sí an-fháilte roimh chúntóir teanga a chuideodh ó thaobh ionchur teanga:

*“Bheadh sé iontach dá mbeadh cúntóirí teanga againn sa rang. Tá sé do-dhéanta do mhúinteoir amháin freastal ar thriocha páistí ó thaobh cúrsaí teangan de. Tá a laghad sin Gaeilge taobh amuigh go bhfuil said ag brath go huile is go hiomlán ortsa.”*

Ní hionann an comhthéacs teanga sna gaelscoileanna agus sna scoileanna Gaeltachta, agus ní thagann ceist an ‘idirtheanga’ i gceist sa Ghaeltacht chomh minic. Sa Ghaeltacht, áfach, bíonn dúshlán i gceist nuair a bhogann teaghlaigh gan Ghaeilge go dtí an Ghaeltacht. Léirigh na hoidí, sa Ghaeltacht agus sna gaelscoileanna araon, an tábhacht a bhain le tacaíocht ó na tuismitheoirí d’obair na scoile.

## **An Ghaeilge i gComhthéacs na Scoile**

Bíonn straitéisí i bhfeidhm ag na hoidí uile chun na daltaí a spreagadh leis an nGaeilge a labhairt sa chlós. Luaigh dhá scoil go raibh córas acu corn agus boinn a bhronnadh ar an rang nó ar an dalta ab fhearr. Déantar iarracht na daltaí a mhealladh le Gaeilge a labhairt seachas iad a bhagairt, ach obair dhian a bhí ann. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Bíonn ort dul ina ndiaidh an t-am ar fad.”*

Tá sé intuigthe i gcás na ngaelscoileanna nach mbeadh mórán Gaeilge i measc na bpáistí sna naionáin bheaga, ach tá sé spésiúil gur sna hardranganna, Rang a cúig agus a sé, is mó atá an dúshlán ina dhiaidh sin maidir le daltaí a spreagadh le Gaeilge a labhairt.

## **Áiseanna agus Tacaíocht**

Tá sé le sonrú ón bplé gur gá i bhfad níos mó áiseanna, ábhar teagaisc, agus téacs leabhair a sholáthar do pháistí Gaeltachta agus do pháistí a fhreastlaíonn ar scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Tá ceist na tacaíochta do pháistí sna scoileanna thuas i bhfad níos leithne ná ábhar teagaisc. Ceann de na prionsabail a bhaineann le cur chuige cumarsáideach ná go dtagann an teanga atá á foghlaim ag an bpáiste lena riachtanais cumarsáide agus foghlama féin. Bíonn ceisteanna bunúsacha á gcur ag múinteoirí i scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, mar shampla: cén comhthéacs nádúrtha atá ag na daltaí sa scoil seo (seachas na páistí atá á dtógáil le Gaeilge) d’úsáid na Gaeilge lasmuigh den scoil, ach go háirithe lena n-aois ghrúpa féin? Agus maidir le teanga an chlóis a mhúineadh: cén fáth go mbíonn an claonadh i ngasúir sna hardranganna casadh ar an mBéarla? Ardaíonn freagraí na gceisteanna abhár díospóireachta agus dushlán níos mó ná deacrachtaí. Go dtí gur tháinig an curaclam nua ar a saol bhí an cur chuige i leith múineadh na

Gaeilge teanga larnách agus bhí an-bhéim go deo ar úsáid téacsleabhar. Ní raibh gá ag an bhfoghlaiméir an teanga a bhí á foghlaim a úsáid, cé nach raibh seo fíor i gcás scoileanna Gaeltachta nó scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Bíonn tábhacht le ‘Ceist na Timpeallachta’ sa chur chuige cumarsáideach. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Tá spreagadh pobail riachtanach don Ghaeilge. Tá sé fánach a bheith ag iarraidh ar pháiste Gaeilge a labhairt muna bhfuil daoine amuigh ansin sásta í a labhairt.”*

## **Críoch**

Is cinnte go bhfuil dúshlán le sárú maidir leis an gCuraclam Gaeilge. Tá sé ráite ag na h-oidí nach bhfuil an curaclam dírithe i gceart ar riachtanais scoileanna T1, ná iomlán a dhóthain dóibh. Mar a dúirt oide amháin:

*“Tá géarghá le forbairt churaclaim ceart dírithe ar na gaelscoileanna agus go mbeadh ionchur ag daoine a bhfuil taithí na mblianta acu...Ba mhaith linn rud éigin structúrtha.”*

Moladh go raibh sé in am ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta díriú arís ar threoiríní cinnte, struchtúrtha a chur ar fáil do scoileanna T1 maidir le múineadh na Gaeilge agus an Bhéarla. Is léir go raibh múinteoirí scoileanna T1 ‘ag súil len i bhfad níos mó ón gcuraclam’.

Is gá leanúint leis an tseirbhís tacaíochta atá curtha ar fáil ag an gClár Tacaíochta Curaclaim Bunscoile i bhfoirm cuiditheoirí don Ghaeilge. Is léir freisin go bhfuil inseirbhís leanúnach de dhíth chun tacú leis na hoidí ‘an leabhrán idéalach a chur i bhfeidhm’. Mhol na hoidí go mbeadh scoileanna den chineál céanna le chéile do chúrsaí inseirbhíse, mar nach ionann na cúinsí teagaisc i scoileanna dhá oide agus i scoileanna móra. Loirg na hoidí tuilleadh leabhair, cluichí, agus ábhar praiticiúil chomh maith, cé gur luaigh siad freisin nach raibh siad i gcónaí ar an eolas faoin a raibh ar fáil. Moladh go m’fhéidir go mbeadh ról ag na hionaid oideachais oidí a chur ar an eolas faoi áiseanna agus acmhainní a bhíonn ar fáil.

## C. ANAILÍS AR THAIGHDE CHUMANN MÚINTEOIRÍ ÉIREANN I SCOILEANNA T2

### Réamhrá

Thosaigh cúrsaí inseirbhíse sa Ghaeilge do scoileanna T2 sa scoilbhliain 2000–2001. Sa chéad bhliain, cuireadh béim ar éisteacht agus labhairt ach go háirithe. Sna blianta 2001/2002 agus 2002/2003 cuireadh lá inseirbhíse eile ar fáil do scoileanna T2 agus cuireadh seirbhís cuiditheoireachta ar fáil do gach scoil ó shoin. I gcás scoileanna T2 tosaíodh ar chur i bhfeidhm an churaclaim sna ranganna naíonán go Rang a dó sa scoilbhliain 2002/2003 agus sna hardranganna sa scoilbhliain 2003/2004.

Chinn Coiste Oideachais Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann an dara chéim den taighde ar Churaclam na Gaeilge i scoileanna T2, ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar dara theanga acu, a dhéanamh san Earrach 2004. Eagraíodh fócas-ghrúpaí le trí ghrúpa múinteoirí as scoileanna ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar dhara teanga acu chun tuairimí na múinteoirí ar an gcuraclam a phlé. Tá achoimre ar na tuairimí a bailíodh thíos.

### Naíonáin

Is léir go bhfuil páistí sna naíonáin agus sna bunranganna ag baint an-tairbhe as an gcuraclam leasaithe. Tá an bhéim ar chumarsáid i.e. ar éisteacht agus ar labhairt na teanga. Tá na múinteoirí an-sásta nach dtosaítear ar an scríbhneoireacht agus ar an léitheoireacht go dtí rang a dó, cé go bhfuil scoileanna ann fós ina dtosaítear i rang a haon agus cinn eile a fhanann go dtí rang a trí. Tá na múinteoirí sásta, ar an iomlán, go bhfuil na foilsitheoirí ag freastal go maith ar riachtanais an churaclaim leasaithe.

Mar sin féin tá na múinteoirí den tuairim go bhfuil dúshlán ann an curaclam nua Gaeilge a theagasc sna naíonáin. Mar a dúradh ‘sna fócas-ghrúpaí:

*“Certainly in Junior Infants we would find it difficult for children to be able to ask questions... They enjoy Irish and parents say they are learning lots of Irish.”*

*“They actually understood a lot more than they could give me.”*

Is léir go bhfuil tionchar éigin ag an gcuraclam nua ar chur chuige na múinteoirí féin. Mar a léirigh roinnt múinteoirí:

*“I found that I was more inclined to speak Irish.”*

*“I will do ten minutes in the morning and another ten minutes later and it will be a conversation thing.”*

Ceaptar, áfach, go bhfuil an t-uafás pleanála le déanamh, mar is léir ón méid seo a leanas:

*“Need lots of time and personal energy to invest in it. Very teacher-centred.”*

*“How are we expected to bring home all this planning?”*

*“Multi-tasking that teachers are expected to do is overwhelming, especially in relation to Irish.”*

Níl múinteoirí sásta leis an bhfoclóir a fheiceann said ins na téacsleabhair. Ní thaitníonn focail bhréige, ‘make-up word’s, mar “seacht-suas” leo. Tá an iomarca díobh ann, dar leo. Mar sin féin, tá na múinteoirí dóchasach faoin gcuraclam sna bunranganna.

*“The enthusiasm is there with the younger kids”.*

## **Ardranganna**

Níl na múinteoirí ó rang a dó go dtí rang a sé chomh sásta céanna. Luaigh a lán díobh tionchar na meánscoileanna, idir scrúduithe iontrála agus clár na Gaeilge a dhéantar iontu, agus, dar ndóigh, an Teastas Sóisearach.

*“It is unbelievable the difference when they go into secondary school. They have to start writing essays and there is such a big leap.”*

*“I think there is a mismatch still there in terms of expectations... or perceived expectations of parents around what is expected at second level.”*

Tá múinteoirí an-bhuartha faoin dtionchar atá ag na scrúduithe iontrála seo ar a gcuid oibre. Tá said faoi shrian acu. Dar leo, níl leanúnachas ann idir clár na bunscoile mar atá sé anois agus clár na meánscoile. Labhair múinteoirí faoin síor dul siar atá le déanamh sna h-ardranganna. Luaigh duine amháin gur chuimhin leis duine ag rá ar lá inseirbhíse

*“We often find in rang a sé that we are going over the same stuff that we did in rang a trí. It’s like ‘Groundhog Day!’”*

Dúirt múinteoir eile nach raibh sách ama ann chun dul siar a dhéanamh. Cuireann na múinteoirí fáilte roimh an modh cumarsáide mar go mbíonn páistí ag labhairt na Gaeilge agus ag baint taitnimh as. Ba chuma dá ndéanfadh said botúin sna bunranganna ach go háirithe. Tá béim ar an líofacht.

*“If they are going to use Irish, then it is like a toddler learning to talk. You have got*

*to let them slip up in the occasional word and let them keep going.”*

Ach, ó rang a trí ar aghaidh tá gá, dar leis na múinteoirí, le béim a chur ar chruinneas, chomh maith. Tá gá le tús a chur le gramadach foirmeálta.

*“It has to come back in. If that is lost the language is lost. The beauty of the language and the structures are there.”*

Tá sé deacair suim na bpáistí a mhúscailt sa Ghaeilge de réir mar a théann said in aois. Ceaptar gur tionchar ón dtaobh amuigh is cúis le seo. Mar a dúirt múinteoir amháin:

*“Some kids as they get older find that speaking Irish is no longer cool.”*

## **Éisteacht**

Tá na dlúth-dhioscaí atá ag dul leis na scéimeanna nua in úsáid go forleathan. Is mór an chabhair é do na páistí a bheith ag éisteacht le guthanna éagsúla seachas guth an mhúinteora. Bíonn siad ag dul i dtaithí ar chanúintí éagsúla, chomh maith. Léann múinteoirí dánta sa rang. Éisteann na daltaí le scéalta a léitear dóibh. Is breá leis na páistí óga na leabhair mhóra. Úsáideann said na leaganacha cainte atá iontu agus iad ag comhrá. Éisteann said le rannta agus amhráin, chomh maith. Is féidir leo teoracha a leanúint. Déantar cláracha ó TG4 a thairfeadh le taispeáint sa rang.

## **Labhairt**

Tá gach duine ar an dtuairim go bhfuil i bhfad níos mó labhairt ar siúl anois, agus go bhfuil na páistí ag baint taitnimh as. Tá béim mhór ar an gcumarsáid. Tá na múinteoirí ag iarraidh teanga bheo a dhéanamh den Ghaeilge. Tá straitéisí éagsúla ag múinteoirí chun na páistí a ghríosadh chun an Ghaeilge a úsáid sa rang foirmeálta agus taobh amuigh den rang i rith an lae. Mar shampla, cuireadh páistí ar theachtaireachtaí chun an Ghaeilge a chleachtadh. Sna ranganna úsáidtear drámaí, ceisteanna agus freagraí, comhrá beirte, obair i ngrúpaí, ról-ghlacadh, agus puipéid. Chomh maith, déantar cur síos ar phictiúir, insítear scéalta, tugtar eolas conas cupán tae a dhéanamh nó a leithéid, agus imrítear cluichí ar nós Snakes and Ladders le foclóir “ag dul siar/ar aghaidh, suas, síos”. Don Ghaeilge neamhfhoirmiúil i rith an lae, iarrtar ar dhaltaí teachtaireachtaí a thabhairt trí Ghaeilge nó teoracha a thabhairt trí Ghaeilge, déantar ealaín nó/ agus corpoideachas trí Ghaeilge, baintear úsáid as ‘Frás na seachtaine’, eagraítear Seachtain na Gaeilge, agus déantar filíocht, amhráin agus rince trí Ghaeilge.

Ta sé deacair obair bheirte nó obair i ngrúpaí a eagrú i ranganna móra. Is féidir leo a bheith glórmhar go leor. Mhol múinteoir amháin an sean-chóras monotóireachta, faoi mar a scríobh Tom Ryan, do ranganna measctha. Is féidir leis na páistí i rang a dó

oibriú leis na naíonáin. Tá an-chuid réamh-obair le déanamh sara mbíonn páistí in ann eolas a thabhairt ar conas cupán tae a dhéanamh nó a leithéid, agus dar leis na múinteoirí níl an t-am ann. Dar leo, ní leor trí nó trí go leith uair a' chloig in aghaidh na seachtaine chun spriocanna an churaclaim a bhaint amach. Mar a dúirt múinteoir amháin:

*“A half an hour a day is not going to make anyone fluent, particularly when there is no back-up from anyone outside.”*

Is dúshlán é an bhéim ar chumarsáid. Bhí múinteoir amháin den tuairim go mbeadh ar scoil a bheith ina ghaelscoil chun an curaclaim a fheidhmiú go hiomlán, agus go raibh sé tábhachtach cothromaíocht a bheith ann.

*“To do the curriculum really well, you would nearly need to be a gaelscoil, if you are going to do communication... there is a question of balance... so therefore you have to have a different approach.”*

Dúirt múinteoir eile nach bhfuil go leor obair ó bhéal á dhéanamh sna h-aranganna. Níl an líofacht ann.

*“Wouldn't it be great if they knew their séimhiús and urús all through listening!”*

I scoil amháin tosaíonn said le habairt shimplí i rang na naíonán agus cuirtear ar aghaidh ó rang go rang é tríd an scoil ar fad. Cuirtear na habairtí go léir ar an bhfalla ansin i bhfoirm scéil.

## **Léitheoireacht**

Níl an léitheoireacht ag tosnú go foirmeálta go dtí rang a dó nó rang a trí sa chuid is mó de na scoileanna. Réitíonn gach duine leis an tuairim go bhfuil sé seo luath go leor dóibh, agus gur chóir go mbeadh an teanga labhartha acu ar dtús sara dtugann siad faoin bhfocal scríofa. Bhí meascán tuairimí ann maidir leis na téacsleabhair nua atá in úsáid sna ranganna. Tá scéimeanna éagsúla in úsáid. Tá daoine áirithe sásta leis an scéim atá acu agus daoine eile a cheapann go bhfuil sé ró-dheacair nó nach bhfuil go leor ann (go mórmhór i gcomhthéacs na scrúduithe iontrála). Dar leis na múinteoirí ní féidir, i ndáiríre, breith a thabhairt orthu go dtí go mbíonn an réamhobair sa teanga labhartha déanta ag na páistí sna bunranganna sara dtosaíonn said ar an léamh.

*“You can't just jump in half way in a scheme when the groundwork hasn't been” done.*

Mar sin féin, níor thaitin na cartúin sna leabhair léitheoireachta le héinne. Tá sé soiléir freisin ó bheith ag labhairt leis na múinteoirí nach bhfuil mórán eolais acu ar an réimse mór leabhar atá ar fáil i nGaeilge anois. Luaigh múinteoir amháin go n-iarrtar

ar dhaltáí na n-ardranganna leabhair shimplí a léamh do dhaltáí na mbunranganna, agus gur buntáiste é seo dóibh uile.

*“We address the low interest the children have on the topic versus the Irish that they are capable for by getting them to read to the younger children so fifth and sixth class would go into junior and senior infants, first and second class.”*

## **An Cur Chuige Comhtháite**

Is léir go bhfuil ag éirí le múinteoirí an cur chuige comhtháite a chur i gcrích agus iad i mbun Gaeilge a mhúineadh (comhtháthú na gceithre scil teangan ‘sna ceachtanna: éisteacht, labhairt, scríbhneoireacht agus léitheoireacht). Mar a dúirt said, is féidir téama a thoghadh agus ansin luí isteach ar na scileanna éagsúla. Luaigh múinteoir amháin deacracht leis an scríobh agus luaigh múinteoir eile nach raibh go leor ábhar éisteachta ann. Bhraith duine eile go raibh an iomarca scríbhneoireachta le déanamh sna h-ardranganna le freastal ar na scrúduithe iontrála. I gcoitinne bhí na múinteoirí den tuairim go bhfuil na ceithre scileanna clúdaithe go maith sna scéimeanna nua.

## **Tuismitheoirí**

Luaigh múinteoirí freisin an tábhacht a bhain leis na tuismitheoirí. Ní bhíonn tuismitheoirí i gcónaí ag tacú le foghlaim na Gaeilge. Mar a dúirt múinteoir amháin:

*“It’s down to attitudes. Parents are not interested. They want their kids to perform well at English and maths.”*

Ach, mar a dúirt múinteoir eile, tá sé tábhachtacht tacaíocht na dtuismitheoirí a lorg, toisc nach dea-thaithí a bhí ag gach tuismitheoir ar fhoghlaim na Gaeilge.

*“I think there is huge cultural stuff around the Irish language as well (baggage) that a lot of us haven’t resolved and I think, for a lot of parents, their experiences of school, maybe, weren’t the best/helpful in terms of feeling positive towards it. It was always that hard subject and difficult (beaten into them) and it still is there. “*

Bhí na múinteoirí den tuairim go gcaithfear iarracht a dhéanamh dearcadh dearfach i leith na Gaeilge a chothú i measc na dtuismitheoirí. I measc na moltaí a tairgeadh, luadh go bhféadfaí bualadh leis na tuismitheoirí ag tús na bliana agus a mhíniú dóibh cad a bheadh ar siúl sa rang/ sa scoil i rith na bliana. Rinne múinteoir amháin tagairt don pholasáí a bhí sa scoil bileog a chur abhaile ar a raibh deich nó dhá ceann déag de leaganacha cainte air, leis an míniú tugtha i mBéarla orthu agus an litriú foghraíochta. Dúradh gur oibrigh an córas seo go maith dóibh sa scoil mar nach n-airíonn na tuismitheoirí go bhfuil said faoi bhagairt agus go bhfaigheann said an-tacaíocht ó na tuismitheoirí don chóras.

## Críoch

Bhí na múinteoirí go láidir den tuairim go bhfuil ualach pleanála le déanamh. Bhí gach rud leagtha amach don mhúinteoir sa ‘Bhuntús’. Ní raibh gá ach é a leanúint céim ar chéim. Ach leis an gcuraclam nua bhí i bhfad níos mó le déanamh ag an múinteoir:

*“There is a whole lot of more need for a level of skill and adaptability on the teacher’s part.”*

Luadh go m’fhéidir gur fadhb é seo do mhúinteoirí nach raibh líofa sa teanga.

*“I see that there is a problem now with people who don’t have that facility with the language.”*

Glacadh leis an moladh go ndéanfadh múinteoirí a gcuid ullmhúcháin agus a gcuid pleanála le chéile, ach nach raibh an t-am ann chuige seo. Mar a duirt múinteoir amháin:

*“We need more time to work on collaborative stuff. It is hugely beneficial but time consuming.”*

Bhí moladh ag dul don traenáil inseirbhíse a cuireadh ar fáil mar chuid den Chlár Tacaíochta Curaclaim (PCSP). Luadh go raibh gá lena thuilleadh comhoibriú idir múinteoirí. Ba léir nach raibh múinteoirí ag baint úsáide as na h-eiseamláirí go léir sa lámhleabhar ach go raibh said ag leanúint leis na scéimeanna atá curtha ar fáil ag na foilsitheoirí. Dúradh ro raibh a thuilleadh pictiúir, fearais agus dlúth-dioscaí ag teastáil. D’fháilteodh múinteoirí roimh an deis féachaint ar mhúinteoirí eile ag teagasc:

*“One of the great disadvantages of teaching in this country is that you come out of teacher training and you never see another teacher teaching. I think it would be great if we had access to seeing other teachers teaching.”*

Bhí sé spéisiúil freisin gur cheap múinteoir amháin gur ceart go mbeadh an curaclam féin ar fáil i mBéarla freisin:

*“I would find it much easier for me if I could read it in English as well... we should be making it as easy as possible for ourselves to use the resources that are available and we shouldn’t be feeling ashamed because we read them through whatever language.”*

Is fiú a lua freisin go raibh comhordaitheoirí Gaeilge ceaptha ag roinnt scoileanna a ghlac freagracht as an gcuraclam Gaeilge sa scoil, agus a roghnaigh ‘frása na seachtaine’ nó a d’eagraigh seachtain na Gaeilge.

# 4

## English Language Support Service for Non National Pupils

### A. AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Arising from the increase in the number of non-national non-English speaking pupils attending schools in Ireland, the Department of Education and Science agreed to provide support for such pupils in relation to the acquisition of the English language. In the case of primary schools, an additional teacher may be appointed on a temporary basis where there are fourteen such children enrolled. A second teacher may be appointed where there are twenty-eight such pupils enrolled. In schools with less than fourteen children grants may be availed of, in order to support pupils in learning English, or Irish in the case of Gaeltacht schools. Integrate Ireland Language and Training (formerly the Refugee Language Support Unit), based in Trinity College, Dublin, was approached and requested to support the teachers appointed as language support teachers at both primary and post-primary levels.

The terms of reference for this project, agreed with the Department of Education and Science in the summer of 2000, are threefold:

- a) To analyse the linguistic demands of the primary and post-primary curricula and identify the language needed by non-English-speaking non-national pupils in order to participate fully in the educational process.
- b) To develop materials to support the learning of English as a second language in schools.
- c) To present materials, methodology and supplementary aids via an ongoing in-service training programme for language support teachers.

### Language Proficiency Benchmarks

Work undertaken in fulfilment of the first of these terms of reference yielded two sets of English Language Proficiency Benchmarks which reflect the linguistic demands of

the primary and post-primary curricula respectively. The benchmarks have been in use in schools throughout the country since their introduction in the autumn of 2000, and were the foundation of support for language support teachers. The English language proficiency benchmarks are firmly rooted in the themes of the primary school curriculum. Following extensive consultation with teachers in seminars conducted in the school year 2000–2003 a revised version of the benchmarks was prepared and was disseminated via the in-service seminars in autumn 2003.

The most recent version of the language proficiency benchmarks have sought to:

- (i) define global scales of English language proficiency in greater detail;
- (ii) include a new global scale of underlying linguistic competence;
- (iii) rewrite the units of work to take specific account of the five communicative skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing.

Further materials, such as diagnostic and assessment instruments, in addition to teaching aids, have also been prepared.

The English language proficiency benchmarks are intended to facilitate the design and delivery of English language support for non-English speaking children in Irish primary schools. The benchmarks derive from the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), which distinguishes five communicative skills and six levels of proficiency. Though based on the common European framework, the benchmarks developed for primary school pupils differ in three important respects:

- 1 The primary benchmarks do not describe the full range of English language proficiency achievable by a non-English-speaking child at primary level, but rather specify the minimum proficiency required for full participation in mainstream schooling. For that reason, the benchmarks correspond to the first three levels only of the Common European Framework.
- 1 Whereas the descriptions in the Common European Framework reflect a trajectory of language learning that typically covers many years of formal education, from young adolescent to mature adult, the primary benchmarks support a process that is developmental as well as pedagogical, and must be as compact as possible if it is to serve the needs of the target group.
- 1 Whereas the Common European Framework is concerned in the first instance with language learning for general communicative purposes, the primary benchmarks are focussed entirely on the communicative needs imposed by the curriculum. This limitation has two consequences. First, the benchmarks are defined in terms of the communicative practices of the primary classroom and

major themes of the primary curriculum. Secondly, they take account of the fact that English language support is provided on a withdrawal basis; they are formulated so as to emphasize the importance of providing pupils with the means of continuing to learn English during the many hours that they spend each week in the mainstream class.

The primary benchmarks can be used to:

- 1 define the language support teacher's task;
- 1 assess the proficiency of each non-English-speaking pupil newly admitted to the school;
- 1 monitor his/her progress;
- 1 identify the point at which s/he can be fully integrated in the mainstream;
- 1 select appropriate learning activities and materials.

### **European Language Portfolio**

In fulfilment of the second term of reference IILT has developed versions of the European Language Portfolio for primary and post-primary learners of English as a second language. Validated by the Council of Europe's Validation Committee in 2001, these European Language Portfolios support the development of the individual learner's proficiency in English and at the same time provide teachers, principals, inspectors and parents with a dynamic record of progress. They are designed to support key principles that underpin the Irish primary curriculum: learning how to learn, accommodating individual difference, basing learning on what is already known and on the immediate social and educational environment, integrating the development of new knowledge and skills, and, by making the learner an active agent in his/her learning, fostering the development of the learner's full potential. The current language portfolio is in process of further development in light of experience with the revised language proficiency benchmarks.

THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO CONSISTS OF THREE PARTS:

- 1 *Language passport* – This allows the child to articulate his/her linguistic identity and to set broad learning objectives. It also allows the language support teacher to record a regular assessment of the child's developing proficiency in global terms that are ultimately derived from the Common European Framework.
- 1 *Language biography* – This contains a set of self-assessment sheets that correspond to the capacities developed in the units of work. As the child demonstrates (to him/herself as well as to the teacher) that s/he can perform a particular task, and

s/he records this by colouring in the appropriate icon. In this way, progress is clearly evident to the child, to the class teacher and to the child's parents. The child's self-assessment in the language biography combines with the teacher's assessment in the language passport to provide a profile of the child's language proficiency and learning progress. This should be invaluable to other language support teachers who may subsequently work with the child as well as to mainstream class teachers, school principals, and inspectors.

- 1 *Dossier* – In this part of the ELP the child collects worksheets and other relevant material. The dossier provides practical corroboration of the profile of language proficiency and learning progress recorded in the language passport and language biography.

### **Professional Development Seminars**

In addition to the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and the European Language Portfolio, the project is committed to developing a wide range of teacher support materials that are mediated to teachers via a programme of twice-yearly in-service seminars. The seminars for primary language support teachers are given in five locations: Dublin Central, Dublin West, Drogheda, Cork, and Galway.

IILT has gradually built up a database of those schools in which language support teachers are employed on a full-time or part-time basis. At the beginning of each school year a questionnaire is circulated to the principal of each of these schools to identify those in which language support is still being funded. New schools are added to the database as IILT makes contact with them in the course of the school year. The principal and language support teacher(s) are notified of in-service seminars and invited to register. Every attempt is made to facilitate the attendance of teachers at these seminars which take place in the autumn and the spring.

IILT is responsible for all costs related to the holding of in-service seminars, including the reimbursement of expenses to participate, in accordance with Department of Education and Science guidelines. The question of substitution must, however, be negotiated by the school principal teacher directly with the DES. This situation arises rarely, as the absence of the language support teacher for a single school day does not generally require substitution.

The seminar programme is based on a combination of input from Professor David Little and Dr Barbara Lazenby Simpson and the exchange of experience and ideas among teachers. At each seminar teachers are consulted as to their particular needs, and the information elicited in this way helps to shape the development of new materials and the content of future seminar programmes. Such an approach allows for the greatest possible interaction between teachers while allowing for a specific focus on issues of concern. A book exhibition is organized for one round of seminars each year.

Topics presented by IILT in recent seminars have included a presentation on how second languages are acquired, and examples of how to plan the language support programme at both school and class levels. The topics included addressed literacy difficulties in senior primary, the use of computer software to support language learning, a handbook for schools, and the use of school text books for language support. Teachers around the country have contributed a wide range of suggestions for fostering an intercultural environment in the school, and a lengthy list of suggested materials and resources for language support. Information gained in this way is organised and presented as a substantial handout at the subsequent round of seminars. Evaluation questionnaires indicated that, to date, more than 90% of participants found the seminars very good or excellent, and felt that the seminars had included issues of importance for them.

Materials distributed to teachers included a substantial book of activities based on the units of work that constitute the new primary curriculum. The activities in this book include the topics *Myself, Our School, Food and Clothes, People, Colours, Shapes and Opposites, Transport, and Time and Seasons*. The classroom activities are suitable for learners of different ages and different levels of proficiency in English. The book has been well received and there are reports of its use beyond the language support classroom. A book of materials based on primary textbooks has been distributed which includes fully-explained examples of how to use texts in history, geography, environmental studies, and English readers with language support pupils. Another book of materials has been distributed which provides age-appropriate material for use with senior primary pupils who have literacy difficulties. All materials are developed and produced at IILT.

### **Support for Parents**

A handbook for parents of newcomer pupils was developed in association with the Reception and Integration Agency (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform). This handbook was informed by teachers' experiences of dealing with newcomer families and includes information about the educational system in Ireland, the staffing of schools, the curriculum, teaching methods, and the expected role of the parent.

### **Support for Newly-Appointed Teachers**

A significant feature of the in-service programme is the attendance of newly appointed full-time or part-time language support teachers at each seminar. When principals or newly appointed teachers first make contact with IILT details of the school are entered on a comprehensive database. This ensures that the school is

informed automatically of the next seminar to be held in its region. In the meantime, a resource pack is sent to the school containing English Language Proficiency Benchmarks, copies of the European Language Portfolio, the accompanying teacher's handbook, and the book of classroom activities.

In addition, many principals and newly appointed teachers receive advice and support by telephone. On average, three or four responses are made to schools in this way every week. Advice is sought on pupils' possible learning difficulties, the selection of appropriate materials, methods for testing pupils' language proficiency, and effective means of planning the language support programme across the school.

At in-service seminars it has generally been necessary to divide the initial session in order to provide a full induction for new teachers. The induction session includes an introduction to the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks, the European Language Portfolio, assessment checklists, pupil profiling, parent-teacher report forms, second language acquisition, and multicultural information. The parallel session is used to explore particular issues and problems with the more experienced language support teachers. The information gained informs the development of materials and information handouts, and their distribution at subsequent seminars ensures that all teachers have access to the same support/information irrespective of the date of their appointment.

## **The Language Training Manual for Primary Teachers**

The *Language Training Manual* is the means of providing continuity of support. It is distributed to all new teachers at their first seminar and further insertions are added at later seminars. This manual has been developed dynamically over the past three years. The manual currently contains:

- 1 English Language Proficiency Benchmarks.
- 1 European Language Portfolio.
- 1 Teacher's Handbook for European Language Portfolio.
- 1 Observational checklist to track pupil development in the 'Silent Period'.
- 1 Individual pupil record sheets.
- 1 Checklist for observation in the mainstream classroom.
- 1 Observational checklists for each unit of work.
- 1 Parent-teacher meeting report forms (2).
- 1 Suggestions from schools all over Ireland for fostering multi-culturalism in the school.
- 1 Learning and acquiring a second language.

- 1 Cultural information – Nigeria, Islam, Hinduism, Intercultural activities used in schools.
- 1 Planning the language support programme at school level.
- 1 Planning the language support programme at classroom level.
- 1 Suggestions for materials used successfully by teachers for language support.
- 1 Set of handbooks for parents of newcomer pupils in ten languages (developed and produced in collaboration with the Reception and Integration Agency).

### **Concluding Comment**

As the foregoing paragraphs show, a great deal has been achieved since the language support project was first launched in 2000. It is nevertheless essential for the project to continue. There is as yet no medium or long-term stability in the population of language support teachers. While each of the IILT seminars is attended by a core of teachers who have attended from the beginning and by now share a significant level of informed experience, each seminar is also attended by newly appointed language support teachers who need help no less than the more experienced teachers. If in-service seminars are not continuously provided on a regional basis, most of what has been achieved will quickly be lost. It is important to build on the foundations already laid. It is necessary to elaborate a fuller and more explicit curriculum for language support and to develop more refined assessment instruments. It is hoped to be able to move towards the full integration of language support with the mainstream curriculum and the full professionalization of the language support teacher's role.

## **B. RESULTS OF INTO QUESTIONNAIRE TO LANGUAGE SUPPORT TEACHERS**

In May 2003, the INTO Education Committee, as part of its remit on language in the primary school, decided to carry out a brief survey of the Language Support Teaching Service for Non-Irish Nationals in primary schools. A questionnaire was sent to 143 national schools identified by the DES (January 2003) as having a full time language support teacher employed. The Education Committee requested that each language support teacher complete and return the questionnaire by June 2003. In total, eighty-eight completed questionnaires were returned for analysis by INTO, representing a response rate of 62%.

### **School Profile**

The total number of non-national pupils in the schools surveyed was 2,749 – an average of 37 pupils per school. The highest number of non-nationals in any one school is cited as 176 (18% of total number of pupils in school). The lowest number of non-nationals in any one school is cited as 7 (6% of total number of pupils in school). The number of non-English speaking non-nationals who were entitled to a language support service was 1,986 – representing an average of 27 pupils per school. Fourteen language support teachers stated that up to a quarter of their non-national pupils were refugees or asylum seekers and three stated that between 81–95% of their non national pupils were refugees or asylum seekers. Almost nine out of ten (88%) schools surveyed stated that they have one or two language support teachers. Only 1% of schools surveyed stated that they had four language support teachers. Almost a third of schools (30%) were designated disadvantaged.

### **Teacher Profile**

Only a third (27 or 32.5%) of teachers surveyed were permanent teachers. Two fifths (41%) had less than five years' teaching experience and over a quarter (27%) had more than 21 years' teaching experience. Slightly less than two thirds (63%) of the language support teachers were qualified primary school teachers. One teacher had a Diploma in Learning and Support and another had a Diploma in Special Education. Almost a fifth (18%) were qualified post-primary teachers. Other qualifications held included: MA Applied Linguistics, BA Humanities, BA English and Maths, BA Applied Languages, MA Intercultural Studies, BA Hons, Diploma in Human Resource Management, Montessori Diploma in Education.

Language support is predominately found at junior level. Over a third (35%) of

language support teachers surveyed stated that they had between one and five junior infants in their school receiving language support. Almost one in ten (9%) stated that they had more than twelve junior infants in their school receiving language support. One school stated that it had twenty-one non-national junior infants in its school receiving language support. The majority of respondents had between one and five non-nationals receiving language support in all classes.

Language support is provided in primary schools to non-nationals from all over the world. Countries mentioned included: Czech Republic, Nigeria, Congo, Moldova, South Africa, Chechnya, Kosovo, Angola, Pakistan, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Phillipines, France, China, India, Bangladesh, Palestine, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Equador, Poland, Macedonia, Bosnia, Angola, Libya, Chile and Germany.

### **Role of the Language Support Teacher**

There was total unanimity amongst respondents that the main function of their role as language support teacher was to teach English to those non-national children that needed it to allow them participate in and benefit from the mainstream class. The majority of respondents agreed that the ultimate goal of improving the language skills of foreign nationals was their integration in the class, in the school, and in the wider community. It was widely felt that developing communication skills allows non-national pupils to interact with their peers and helps with socialisation and integration. Secondly, language support teachers see themselves as being a support to the classroom teacher, reinforcing reading, comprehension, and language development. A number of respondents also referred to the pastoral role of the language support teacher saying they provided support “both linguistically and emotionally” to foreign national children. One noted that the role was “to be there as a support for them even when they become more fluent; somewhere for them to come when help or direction is needed... this can vary from explaining history to school administration forms.”

The multi-faceted nature of the role of the language support teacher also emerged in the survey. A significant number referred to the liaison element of the role. While the majority agreed that liaison with parents, many of whom had little or no English, was a vital element of the job, other bodies that were mentioned included Government agencies, residences, social workers, and community welfare officers. The non-teaching, counselling aspect of the role was again underlined, with many teachers noting that they provided emotional support for the children they take for language support. The promotion of interculturalism in the school was also seen as an important element of the role of the language support teacher as was developing awareness of multi-cultural diversity among other teachers. Many of the language support teachers also acted as a support for mainstream teachers on a regular basis,

providing an opportunity for them to write up schemes of work, substituting as required and, in some cases, taking the mainstream class for a half an hour per week to observe their pupils in the mainstream setting.

Other functions included supervising non-Catholic children during confession and communion practice, accompanying children to swimming, and acting as mentor, guide, and interpreter.

## **Caseload**

In general, teachers believed that the maximum number of children any one language support teacher should be responsible for was fourteen to eighteen. Many respondents were of the view that the cut off number for the appointment of a second language support teacher was far too high. In relation to the optimum number of pupils with whom a language support teacher can work effectively at any one time, the consensus was that small groups of between three to six pupils was the most desirable. However, the number of different nationalities, levels of ability, and language proficiency of the individual pupils were all factors that influenced the size of an effective language support class. One teacher explained how s/he operated six daily sessions of 45 minutes, adding that “any session with more than three pupils diminishes the essential one-to-one contact these pupils require, especially when one considers the various levels of ability.” In addition, practical issues such as size of classroom or space available to conduct the language support classes also have to be taken into consideration.

## **Criteria for Appointment**

In relation to the criteria for the allocation of language support teachers to schools, which are based on the levels of fluency in English of the pupils, 70% of respondents who expressed an opinion felt that these criteria were not offering sufficient support to the non-national population. A substantial number of teachers felt that in order to provide sufficient support to the non-national population, the two-year time limit for language support should be extended, citing it as inadequate. Furthermore, it was felt that it was very important for the language support teacher to be a trained primary school teacher. It was held that the language support teacher should be familiar with the primary school curriculum and be aware of what level of language was required for each class. Other respondents felt that those teachers providing language support should not only be qualified primary teachers, but should also hold a qualification in EFL (English as a Foreign Language). One teacher argued that the position of language support teacher would be an ideal post of responsibility in the school.

It is a widely held view that a language support teacher must have skills far in excess

of their ability to teach English as a second language. Attributes seen as of equal importance included a strong awareness of intercultural issues, a non-judgemental nature, and personal skills such as sensitivity, patience, understanding, compassion and enthusiasm.

In relation to the aim of developing fluency in English, many respondents felt that this was too narrow an interpretation of the role of language support teacher. On one level, fluency in spoken/social English was important, but did not cover the specialist terms needed to perform maths functions, for example, or difficult historical and geographical terms. On a broader level, it was widely felt that the language support teacher must deal with social, emotional, cultural and behavioural issues, with many teachers referring to the traumatic backgrounds from which some of their pupils have come.

## **Inservice**

The majority of language support teachers responding to the survey have had two days inservice training with Integrate Ireland Language and Training Centre, Trinity College, Dublin. However, 10% had not received any inservice at all. In addition, only 9% confirmed that they had attended the inservice for curriculum implementation organised by PCSP. It was felt that inservice for language support teachers should be more frequent and of longer duration, and that a week-long summer course, eligible for EPV days should also be available.

The greatest benefit of inservice was seen as the opportunity to meet with other language support teachers. Communication with other teachers in similar roles, the sharing of ideas and resources, the establishment of support networks, and an opportunity to share concerns were all seen to be an integral part of the inservice days. On a practical level, the provision of resources, information and teaching materials, as well as a curriculum outline and programme of work, were seen as of particular help. The Language Training manual was mentioned as being of significant help as was advice given on benchmarking pupils, assessment, and inter-culturalism.

When asked about their future in-service needs, language support teachers had a wide range of topics they would like to see addressed. One issue that emerged as giving rise to concern was that of assessment. Many felt that grading ability was very difficult in the language support class. One teacher sought a “comprehensive testing system for pupils when they arrive, plus further tests to assess their progress”. Teachers also suggested that getting information on different cultures, traditions and religions would be useful for their role. More resource materials were also suggested, with some teachers commenting that the materials were not age-appropriate. It was felt, in particular, that materials for the junior classes were poor. Other suggestions for future training included TEFL courses, counselling, and guidance on communicating with the parents and families of the non-national pupils. It was noted that, in relation

to in-service for mainstream teachers, a talk outlining the role of the language support teacher in the school would be of benefit.

The theme of communicating to mainstream teachers about the role of the language support teacher within the school permeated the survey results, with some teachers suggesting that a whole-school approach was necessary. However, when asked about the support and advice that was available to the language support teachers, the majority cite colleagues as being of the greatest help. Firstly, other language support teachers were seen as providing the most support, then the mainstream class teacher, the resource teacher, the learning support teacher, and the principal teacher. Outside of the school, the local education centres were mentioned as being a source of advice as were the local support groups recently formed in Cork and Dublin (ELST). Other bodies mentioned as being of support included Comhlámh (a cultural diversity programme), the Refugee Council, the Irish Sisters of Charity, the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Mater Dei Institute, NALA, the Mid West Development Education Centre, the Department of Education and Science, and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. It is also worth noting that 14% of respondents felt that no support or advice was available to them.

Supports that language support teachers would like in relation to their role were many, ranging from English language classes for the parents and families of non-national children to better access to psychological services. Finance for improved and relevant resource materials was also mentioned, particularly more work-sheets, standardised tests, and structured programme guidelines.

## **Programme**

When devising a programme for non-national children, the majority of language support teachers carry out an initial assessment, often in conjunction with the class teacher, to establish the level of proficiency. Targets were then set to address the immediate learning needs. However, once again teachers emphasised the widely diverging levels of ability and fluency of the children, and the difficulties which were presented by trying to teach several levels in one group. After initial assessment, many teachers used the IILT training manual as a basis for devising what is essentially an IEP for each child attending language support class.

In relation to the programme available to language support teachers, a narrow majority (55%) said that they were satisfied with the programme available to them. However the majority of the 'yes' answers were qualified by statements such as 'reasonably satisfied', 'mostly', 'it needs to be more structured', 'yes, except for senior pupils with little or no English'.

One fifth (20%) of language support teachers consulted with the class teacher on a daily basis and over two fifths (44%) on a weekly basis, regarding the language

learning needs of the pupils for whom they provided support. One quarter (25%) of language support teachers met the relevant class teacher once a month, with the remainder meeting either ‘rarely’, ‘never’ or ‘dependant on classroom teacher’s interest and co-operation’. When it came to consulting with the learning support teacher, the figures were far lower. Only 11% of language support teachers consulted with the learning support teacher every week, 27% consulted monthly, 30% stated that they rarely consulted the learning support teacher, and 14% stated that they never consulted the learning support teacher. A number of the respondents made the point that the non-national children attending language support classes were not entitled to receive any other form of teaching support.

### **School Policy**

Of the schools surveyed, 72% stated that their school operated a whole school approach to supporting non-national pupils in the school. From the point of view of ethos this was interpreted as the school operating a policy of acceptance, integration and inclusivity and ‘an overall positive attitude and willingness by all staff to support the children’. Each school had different ideas on how to make this work, from regular meetings with the principal, class and language support teachers co-ordinating the work of the children, to providing English language classes for the parents of non-national children. Many schools had a policy of celebrating cultural differences by holding activities such as International Picnics, International Fashion Shows, or World Cup Soccer competitions. Some schools displayed welcome signs in many different languages. One respondent described the school’s approach as follows:

*“... to be aware of possible psychological trauma that individual pupils may have experienced; to develop confidence and self-esteem; to promote positive learning experiences that are gained by having a multi-ethnic mix within the school; to continue to build up resources of learning materials.”*

### **Advantages of Current Language Support Service**

The majority of respondents are of the view that the current system of language support service benefits the pupil, the class teacher, and the school. It was felt that the non-national children attending language support classes integrated more quickly and grew in confidence in the small group/one-to-one situation. As one respondent put it:

*“It is easier for them to practise new words in the privacy of the language support room. A full day in class must be bewildering for the child, so going to the language support teacher’s room provides a break for the child and also for the teacher as some*

*of the children are very demanding.”*

It was noted that participation in the mainstream classroom increased and that the children often formed a strong link with the language support teacher who could act as a mediator between the school and the family. At the same time, the withdrawal of non-national children from the class alleviated pressure on the class teacher. A teacher who dealt with a class that had one third of its pupils from non-national families, pointed out that group withdrawal allows the class teacher to progress with the other pupils. One teacher asserted that the service was “...essential and invaluable. It would not be possible to enrol non-English-speaking pupils without the help of a language support teacher.” Additionally, the school was seen to benefit from embracing multi-culturalism.

### **Disadvantages of Current Language Support Service**

The overwhelming disadvantage of the current language support service according to the respondents was the limited time-frame. A two-year service for children who may never have attended school and may speak no English at home or all through the summer vacation period was seen as wholly inadequate. In addition, the pupil teacher ratio was also severely criticised, as was the cut-off points for the appointment of a second language support teacher, and the maximum number of language support teachers that may be appointed to any one school.

Another disadvantage identified by language support teachers was the temporary nature of the post. This caused problems for recruiting qualified personnel and led, in certain cases, to feelings of being isolated from other staff members. A large number of language support teachers were not qualified primary teachers and it was felt that adequate training and or guidelines were not provided prior to commencing in the post. Some respondents were of the view that all language support teachers should have a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) qualification in addition to a teaching qualification. A related problem was the lack of clarity regarding the place of a language support teacher within the school. According to one respondent:

*“A language support teacher can be called on at any time to do substitution duties, cover lessons etc. Lessons are therefore cancelled at the last minute and lesson plans postponed. Principals should be made aware that this is not to be recommended.”*

It was emphasised that integrating non-national pupils into the school should be a whole-school responsibility. It emerged that some language support teachers were called on to deal with every incident of racism. Respondents recommended that some form of in-service should be available for the class teachers to help them fully understand the role and work of the language support teacher.

Finally, the question of adequate resources also arose, and difficulties arising from the lack of interpreters, lack of access to an adequate psychological service, and lack

of financial resources were outlined.

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of observations that can be made about the language teaching support service arising from the findings of the INTO questionnaire to the language support teachers. In general, it is quite a successful service in that language support is being provided to a significant number of non-national children in order to assist such children in accessing the whole curriculum. The professional support available from IILT in Trinity College has contributed enormously to developing the competence and confidence of primary teachers in meeting the English language needs of non-national pupils. Indeed, it could be argued that it is the collaboration between the professional team in IILT and practising primary teachers that has been at the core of successful developments in relation to a language support curriculum, assessments instruments, and teaching materials suitable for use in the Irish context. It is important, in order to ensure the continued development of the language support service, that the support of IILT continues to be available to schools and teachers.

Respondents to the INTO survey have made it clear, however, that many non-national pupils also need support in areas other than language, and that the Language Support Service, though supportive in terms of language learning, has too narrow a focus as a support service with regard to meeting the broader needs of such pupils. The majority (80%) of respondents felt that social, emotional and psychological needs of non-national pupils were not catered for through the current support service, since it was conceived solely as a language support service. The teachers stated that they themselves offered emotional support, but that, in general, insufficient access to psychological services led to neglect of other difficulties such as trauma and behavioural challenges. Whether the language support teachers should be given a broader role in relation to supporting non-national pupils is an issue that needs to be debated. Perhaps it would be more appropriate for schools to offer counselling or psychological support to all pupils who require them. Alternatively, a combination of a broader role for the support teachers and improved access to psychological and counselling services may be required. It was also stated that some pupils have special needs, which do not become apparent immediately due to the language barrier, and that such pupils could benefit from access to the learning support teacher. Furthermore, the need for these children to have access to extra-curricular activities and homework clubs was emphasised, since the centres where they lived were institutions which, commonly, were not conducive to play or learning.

According to the Department of Education and Science it is envisaged that non-national, non-English speaking pupils would require a maximum of two years of language support in order to acquire a sufficient level of competency to access the

curriculum. This period of time was considered inadequate by the respondents, particularly for pupils who had difficulties other than language difficulties, and for pupils who had very little education prior to their arrival in Ireland. Whereas a two year period may be considered a general guideline there needs to be considerable flexibility so that the diverse language needs of all pupils can be met.

The two year time limit also had an impact on the stability of the service in relation to teacher deployment. The positions of language support teachers are temporary positions, as it is envisaged that pupils will not require a support service after two years. In some cases, permanent staff members are deployed as language support teachers, and temporary teachers are placed in the classrooms. In other cases, however, temporary teachers are employed as language support teachers, but often move on to other positions that offer permanency, with the school then losing the benefit of the investment in the professional development of the language support teacher. It is also unfortunate that, due to the current shortage of qualified primary teachers, some positions are filled by personnel who are not qualified primary teachers. As a result of the temporary nature of the service, many language support teachers feel isolated and undervalued as members of staff. Given that the reality is that additional pupils often replace those who no longer need a regular service, many schools will require the services of a language support teacher for many years to come. It would, therefore, be more beneficial for both pupils and teachers that language support teaching positions be made permanent positions.

With the number of non-national children in the Irish primary school system likely to increase, the language support service needs to be continuously reviewed, developed and resourced. Schools also need further clarification in relation to the role of the language support service. A wealth of expertise has evolved in recent years since the support service was first established. The system needs to build this capacity further. The role of the language support teacher needs to be professionalized, and language support teachers need to be adequately supported in terms of pre-service education, professional development opportunities and resources.

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## Modern Languages in Primary Education

Prior to the pilot programme for Modern Languages in Primary Schools, which was initiated in 1998, the teaching and learning of modern languages in Irish primary schools was carried out on an ad-hoc and uncoordinated basis. According to the INTO survey on modern languages (1991), approximately 24% of schools indicated that a modern language was being taught in the school. However, in most cases modern languages were taught outside school hours and, in general, parents paid for these classes. French was the most commonly taught language and there was very little liaison or co-ordination with second level schools.

The Pilot Programme for Modern Languages in Primary Schools was initiated in the same year that the revised primary curriculum was launched, a curriculum in which the teaching of modern languages does not feature. A key influence on this decision was the *Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum* (1990), which did not recommend the introduction of modern languages to the primary curriculum. This was based on the perception that the curriculum was overloaded and the fact that the curriculum already had two languages. In its discussion document on *Culture and Communication: Foreign Languages in the Primary Curriculum* (1993), the NCCA outlined the case for and against the introduction of modern languages at primary level. The Report recommended the establishment of a pilot project in order to progress the matter further. In favour of introducing a foreign language in primary schools, the NCCA stated that children can benefit from prolonged exposure to language

acquisition in terms of attitude and communicative competence, if programmes are carefully taught, and provided that there is proper co-ordination between the primary and post-primary programmes (NCCA 1993, p. 9). It was also recognised, however, that the primary curriculum was already overloaded and that the learning of a 'second' language (Irish or English) incorporates some of the benefits associated with foreign language learning in general.

## Rationale for introducing Modern Languages in Primary Schools

The Council of Europe has emphasised the importance of developing language policies in member states in order to enhance the communicative competence of European citizens. The European Commission has stated that every European citizen should be able to communicate in two European languages other than their own. Member States have therefore been encouraged to introduce modern languages at primary level. According to the Eurydice report *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe* (2001), the majority of European countries introduce a second or foreign language at primary level, though it is not compulsory in all cases. English is the most popular foreign language and French is the second most popular language taught at primary level. In Ireland, the White Paper on Education: *Charting our Education Future* (1995) emphasised the importance of European awareness and stated that primary school pupils would be introduced to European languages, life and culture (p. 22). Government also gave a commitment to contribute fully to education initiatives within the European Union (p. 205). The pilot programme for Modern Languages in Primary Schools in Ireland was supported by the European Social Fund.

The European Union also supports language and cultural awareness in primary schools through programmes such as Socrates, particularly the Lingua C and Comenius schemes. The Lingua C scheme places language assistants from various European countries on work experience in schools, offering pupils an opportunity to gain an insight into different cultures. In some cases, language assistants may undertake language tuition in schools. The Comenius programme encourages partnerships between schools in relation to educational project work, including modern languages. This programme also offers pupils opportunities to gain insights into the lifestyles, culture and customs of other Europeans. Approximately fifty primary schools received funding from Léargas during the school year 2002–2003 in relation to developing European partnerships.

Parents, through the National Parents' Council – Primary, have indicated support for the introduction of modern languages in the primary school. The National Parents Council – Primary published a discussion paper on Modern European Languages in the Primary School in 1989, and submitted a minority report to the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum regretting the decision of the Review Body not to recommend the introduction of modern languages. Parents in the schools involved in the pilot project have also been supportive of modern languages initiative (ITÉ 2002, p. 102).

However, research appears to indicate that there is little conclusive proof that younger children have any greater language learning capabilities, at least in a school situation, in comparison with their older counterparts. In the early nineties the INTO produced a document entitled *Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools; Issues and Research* (1991), in which, Dr John Harris outlined research findings and

observations which have as much relevance in the year 2003 as they had in 1990. The advantages of starting early are derived from the length of time spent learning the language rather than from the younger age of the child as such. A possible exception may be language immersion programmes. A summary of the main issues addressed in the INTO report are outlined below.

## **Research and International Practice**

The advent of a modern language programme at primary level is based on the belief that the earlier the child is exposed to a second language, the better. Harris cited a substantial body of research which would indicate that this is not necessarily the case, and that young children are no better than older children at acquiring a foreign language in a formal school context (INTO 1991, pp. 4, 5). Stern (1982) has argued that there is little support in the available literature for regarding an early start as imperative. Long (1990) argued that adults and older children process and proceed through the early stages of morphological and syntactic development faster than children. Burstall et al. (1974), who conducted the largest single study of this topic, the pilot scheme 'French from Eight', in Britain found that when early starters in French (aged eight) were compared to the later starters (aged eleven), the early starters scored higher on speaking and listening tests but were either equal or lower on reading and writing tests by the time they reached the age of thirteen. By the age of sixteen they differed only in listening, despite the three extra years exposure the early starters had.

Studies of French immersion schools in Canada showed that children immersed at the equivalent of upper primary level in Irish schools were better second language learners than students immersed at infant level. (Harley, 1986). It was thought that the older students may have been more suited to the challenges of the more cognitively demanding aspects of language learning, for example comprehension. It is well documented, however, that both early and late immersion programmes produce significantly superior second language skills compared to regular language programmes, without any cost, it would appear, to the child's first language skills (Swain & Lapkin 1981; McLaughlin, 1985; Genesee, 1987). One might question, therefore, the merit of stretching an already crowded primary curriculum further with another programme of language learning.

Exposure time to the target language concerned is also of significance. In the Canadian experience, while early starters did maintain some advantages in the listening area, it was found generally that those who started later quickly caught up. One of the reasons cited for the failure of early starters in foreign or second language learning to maintain their advantage was the lack of coordination between primary and post primary programmes and approaches. It is interesting that teachers

participating in the pilot project in Ireland referred to the need for coordination and liaison with post primary levels. Inadequate co-ordination between primary and post-primary levels in terms of syllabi, teaching methods, and an inability at post-primary level to make allowances and provision for those who had already begun a second language at primary were all mitigating factors in the Canadian experience. Conversely, in Germany where the above issues were dealt with adequately, and strict continuity between first and second-level was maintained, early starters proved to be better than late starters in English language learning. Therefore, as Harris contends (INTO 1991, p. 9), if programmes are well structured initial progress can be maintained.

In the British, German and Canadian models no negative impacts on other school-work were evident. This was also the case with pupils of lower academic backgrounds or from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Cummins, 1984; Genesee, 1987, Holobow, Genesee, Lambert, Gastright & Met, 1987; Holobow, Genesee & Lambert, 1991). Where pupils achieved a modicum of success a positive attitude towards

speaking the language followed. As with most subjects, the reverse was also evident. Hawkins (1987) referred to a younger child's ability to empathise with the speech and culture of another country. He claimed younger learners had an advantage since adolescents were less likely to empathise and were more likely to feel intimidated. If, as Ekstrand (1976) stated, all aspects of development are enhanced by early stimulation, then there is as good an argument for beginning early in Mathematics, given the body of work a child is expected to get through in his/her life.

Whether a second language should be compulsory or not is another issue. In the Nordic countries foreign language teaching did not become as controversial an issue as in Britain and the United States. English is compulsory for all children over the age of ten in Denmark and has been taught since 1937. In Sweden, children age nine and over have had to learn English since 1972. In these countries, however, the language in

question "has a very specific function in society" (Harris in INTO 1991, p. 14) and is considered "a national and individual necessity," (Hoy, 1976). Hence the necessity to use the language was a factor in its success in these countries. This is borne out by the research of Wu et al., 1994, who concluded that second language learners must have direct experience in the target language with the discourse demands of specific tasks if they are to carry it out as effectively in the second language as in the native language.

In 1990, Harris highlighted the need to equalise the amount of exposure all children would have by learning a language at primary level, and thereby develop a positive orientation towards it, in the context of pupils who might not otherwise have considered it at second-level. This has since become one of the objectives of the Modern Language in the Primary School (MLPS) initiative, particularly in relation to

the lesser taught and learned languages of Spanish and Italian. However, inequalities, such as the tendency of boys tending to score lower than girls, do exist at both primary or post-primary. The primary school as such should not be the panacea for reducing or eradicating inequality in language education. This might be better tackled within the second-level sector.

The influence of home and community on motivation and attitudes, the success or failure of the young pupil in acquiring the language, and the level of organisation of the programmes in schools are all determining factors in the success or otherwise of a modern language programme. Harris and Murtagh (1999) also reached these conclusions in the case of teaching and learning Irish. Moreover, streamlining the transition from primary to post-primary as well as providing second-level programmes that take account of the language learning already acquired at primary level appear to have most chance of success. Coordination between first and second level is also an aspiration of the Modern Language Initiative at primary level. Setting realistic achievable performance levels might also facilitate the introduction of modern languages at primary level.

### **Approaches to Modern Languages in the Primary School**

There are a number of possible approaches to modern language learning in the primary school. The main aim of a language competence programme is to develop foreign language competence. A sensitisation programme model has more modest goals than a language competence model. The aim in this approach is to raise awareness of the existence of other languages through 'taster experiences', and to provide an encounter with many languages. Continuity and progression are not priorities. Children are given an opportunity to develop metalinguistic and intercultural awareness, providing the scaffolding for language learning at second level (ITÉ 2002, p. 224). A language awareness model does not incorporate a great deal of actual foreign language learning but assists in developing cultural awareness and promoting tolerance and positive attitudes. There is little difficulty with transfer to post primary, and a high level of teacher competence in the language is not required if suitable material and guidance is available. Language awareness is also an integral part of the Primary School Curriculum in Gaelic. An immersion approach involves teaching a substantial part of the school curriculum through the medium of the target language. This is the approach used in all-Irish schools in relation to Gaelic.

### **Modern Language Pilot Scheme**

The pilot programme in Modern Languages in the Primary School was first initiated in 1998 as a two year pilot project. A total of 270 schools were selected to partici-

pate during the initial phase out of a total of 1,300 that applied. This number has now increased to 347. The project provided for the teaching of French, German, Spanish or Italian in fifth and sixth classes for one a half hours per week. Teaching is through the target language. The aims of the project included:

- 1 fostering a positive attitude towards language learning;
- 1 encouraging communication in the target language;
- 1 diversification in the number of languages taught.

Efforts were also made to include a representative sample of different types of schools: urban, rural, disadvantaged, special, gaelscoil, Gaeltacht schools, and multi-denominational schools. The term 'Pilot' was dropped in June 2001 and the Modern programme was replaced by the Modern Languages Initiative.

The Kildare Education Centre, which was given overall responsibility for the management of the project, supported the schools and teachers involved in the project. Professional development support, focussing on both language competence and teaching methodologies – was organised for the teachers teaching the languages. In addition, a number of Institutes of Technology have provided Diploma and Certificate courses for primary teachers in the various languages, aimed at improving the teachers' own levels of proficiency in the languages taught. Over 500 primary teachers have enrolled in such courses. Léargas also assists teachers in attending courses abroad during the summer holidays. The teachers teaching the modern languages programme in the primary schools come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are class teachers who teach the modern language to their own class, some are class teachers who teach the modern language to a class other than their own, some are second level teachers, and some are native speakers. The language ability of the teachers varies considerably.

The NCCA drafted comprehensive curriculum and teacher guidelines for teachers. These comprise three strands: Communicative Competence; Language Awareness; and Cultural Awareness. The strand units are listening, speaking, reading and writing.

It is envisaged that developing communicative competence will enable the child to interact appropriately and effectively with others, in a variety of ways. Communication is seen as the principal reason for learning a language. A communicative approach, which is also used in the revised Gaeilge curriculum, concentrates on the needs and interests of the learner, and opportunities are given to pupils to learn the language within real situations. The pupils use the language to complete tasks, to play games, and to role-play.

The language awareness dimension of the programme draws pupils' attention to how language is learnt, how language works, and to the similarities and difference between languages. The cultural awareness strand gives pupils an opportunity to explore the lives

and interests of children in other countries. This strand is easily integrated with other areas of the curriculum, particularly SESE. A number of topics, relevant to the pupils, have been recommended in the Curriculum Guidelines (NCCA, 2001).

### **An Evaluation of the Pilot Project**

Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITÉ) was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science to carry out an independent evaluation of the project in order to:

- 1) ascertain if the project was financially worthwhile;
- 2) evaluate proficiency levels and attitudes;
- 3) inform policy on language teaching.

An initial evaluation report was published by Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann in 2002, which was based on the first two years of the pilot scheme. A further evaluation report is due in 2004.

According to the initial evaluation report almost two thirds (63%) of modern language teachers in the project schools were staff members and 37% were external teachers, either foreign nationals or qualified post-primary teachers. Of those teachers who were staff members, 28% taught a modern language to their own class only, 14% taught both their own class and additional classes within the school, and 58% taught a class other than their own. Just over half of the language teachers felt that sufficient contact with the regular class teacher was maintained.

More than a third (37%) of the teachers failed to fulfil the recommended time allocation of one and a half hours per week. The main reasons given were an over-crowded curriculum and time-tabling problems. The majority of these teachers provided one hour of modern language teaching per week. Non staff members were more successful in complying with the recommended time, as were rural schools where fifth and sixth classes were often taught together. One hour was also the recommended time allocation by those who disagreed with the project's allocation of one and a half hours.

Generally teachers were very satisfied with the inservice and support they received during the first year. However, they felt they needed more opportunities to enhance their own proficiency levels in their chosen language. Diploma and Certificate courses were established in a number of Institutes of Technology to meet this need. In addition, non-staff project teachers required instruction in methodologies suited to younger learners.

The pilot project made a difference in relation to access to a modern language. Three fifths (60%) of schools would have had no pupils studying modern languages

were it not for the pilot project, suggesting that the project had gone a long way in its over-arching aim of providing access to modern languages. In general, a positive attitude was evidenced by parents.

## TEACHING APPROACHES

The teacher guidelines for modern languages advocated a communicative approach to language teaching. It was also an aim of the pilot project to use the target languages as much as possible in the classroom. According to the evaluation report, just under a quarter of the teachers conducted 70%-100% of the lesson in the target language. It appears from the evaluation that a greater emphasis was placed on developing aural and oral skills than on reading and writing. It also seems that the absence of homework and the reduction in written work heightened the enjoyment factor for pupils. Although children enjoyed a communicative approach (for example, songs, raps, games), it appears that teachers still use the more traditional language analytic activities. Yet, in terms of goals, teachers gave the lowest ranking to precision in grammar and usage lowest. A relatively small proportion use IT, for example 62% have never used a CD Rom. However, both teachers and pupils enjoyed some of the innovative methods employed such as drama, wordgames, songs and language awareness activities.

## THE EFFECTS ON PUPILS

Based on the results of tests given to pupils in language classes it would appear that pilot project pupils developed “a significant initial linguistic and communications competence in the modern language” (ITÉ 2002, p. 162) and “real progress” (ITÉ 2002, p. 163) was being made. In general pupils in disadvantaged schools made as much progress as children in other schools. However, low academic achievers did not cope as well according to 62% of teachers. Children generally recognised the importance of communicating in another language and regarded the lessons as ‘fun’, thus fostering a positive attitude to language learning. Substantial progress in the development of listening skills was also evident. The difficulty pupils have in learning and understanding language was also highlighted, though this is a common complaint as evident in research on Irish (Harris and Murtagh 1999). It is important, therefore, to ensure an improvement in the provision of age-appropriate materials for language learning. Nevertheless, according to the evaluators, it could be concluded that a real start has been made in acquiring a modern language and that the foundations for further learning at post-primary level have been laid (ITÉ 2002, p. 163). However, almost two thirds (65%) of language teachers believed that a special initiative was required to promote primary/post-primary links.

It will be important to examine whether the initial positive response to the teaching of modern languages has been sustained in those school that continued with the initiative.

## Modern Languages in Primary School – Issues and Concerns

A number of issues need to be considered in deciding whether modern languages should be introduced in primary schools in Ireland. A brief overview of some of these issues is given below.

### MODEL

The Language Competence/Language Acquisition type programme (as in pilot project) is the preferred model in many European countries and is the model most likely to make a real contribution to the development of communicative ability in a foreign language in the long term (ITÉ 2002). However, it is unclear whether students' communicative ability at school leaving age will have been enhanced if they commenced learning a modern language at age ten in fifth class rather than at age twelve when they entered post-primary school. Follow up studies of pupils from the pilot project will be required in this respect.

A language competence model requires a high level of teacher proficiency in the language and requires dedicated time. Progression and continuity at post primary level are crucial if such an approach is to be a success. A sensitisation or language awareness programme could be accommodated through an integrated approach with the current primary curriculum. Language proficiency requirements for teachers would be more modest, and continuity and progression at post primary level would not be as crucial. Such an approach would prepare pupils for learning a modern language at post-primary level.

### TEACHER

Modern languages in the pilot project have been taught by class teachers to their own classes, by class teachers to classes other than own, and by visiting teachers (some native speakers and some post-primary teachers). The preferred approach, according to research, is that class teachers should teach modern languages to their classes since the language can be used informally throughout the school day. The proficiency level required by class teachers would depend on whether a language competence model, a sensitisation model, or a language awareness model were in place.

As in the pilot project, visiting specialist teachers could be employed to teach modern languages. There would be broader implications for the primary system as this approach would introduce the concept of specialist subject teachers at primary level. At present, primary teachers are generalist teachers, who teach the entire curriculum to their own classes. The employment of part-time teachers on uncertain contracts, as in the pilot project, is unlikely to be sustainable on a national basis in the long term. There would be a further difficulty in relation to the pupils' exposure to the language informally throughout the school day, unless class teachers also had a level of proficiency.

#### TEACHER EDUCATION (PRE-SERVICE)

The implications for teacher education depend on which model might be adopted as this would determine proficiency levels, whether modern languages would be an optional or compulsory element of pre-service teacher education, and whether candidates should have an acceptable Leaving Certificate grade in a modern language prior to entry to teacher education programmes.

#### CLASS LEVEL

The pilot project has been confined to fifth and sixth classes. In Europe, generally, modern languages are taught in senior primary classes. However, a competency model is the norm. Implications for class allocation and the mobility of teachers arise if modern languages were to be confined to the senior classes, particularly if it were the class teacher's responsibility to teach the language. However, it could be possible to introduce sensitisation or language awareness programmes in junior classes at an appropriate level.

#### WHICH LANGUAGE?

The pilot project on Modern Languages in Primary Schools included only four languages, French, German, Spanish and Italian, as does the Modern Languages Initiative, but it is aimed to increase the diversity of languages taught. A sensitisation or language awareness model could include all four languages and possibly more, whereas schools might have to choose one language for a language competency model. The language chosen in primary schools has implications for the post-primary schools to which the pupils transfer. It has implications for employment and redeployment, as schools may insist on employing teachers with a specific modern language.

#### TIME

The pilot project aimed at providing one and a half hours of modern language teaching per week. Schools, in general, used discretionary time for this purpose. The amount of time required would depend on the chosen model. A language awareness programme or a sensitisation approach might not require as much allocated time, since modern languages could be integrated with curriculum areas such as Language and SESE. However, a language competency approach would require dedicated time, and possible options might include the abolition of discretionary time and its allocation to modern languages. Alternatively, the current allocation of time to language could be used, with a readjustment of the times allocated to English and Irish in order to accommodate a modern language.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Opportunities for professional development in language competency and teaching methodologies have been provided for all teachers participating in the pilot project. Any planned introduction of modern languages to all primary schools, regardless of model, has major implications for the system since all primary teachers would need to be offered on-going professional development both in language competency and teaching methodologies. The potential demands on teachers, should a competency model to be taught by the class teacher, be introduced, would be very significant.

## OPPORTUNITY

The introduction of modern languages to primary schools would provide opportunities to all primary teachers to become proficient in a modern language. However, bearing in mind the level of retraining necessary it is likely that it would have to be supported by a major salary increase.

## **A Way Forward**

The introduction of modern languages to the curriculum has considerable implications for teaching and learning in primary schools, for pre-service and in-service education, for the allocation of time to different curriculum areas, and for the continuity of language experience from first level to second level education. The teaching of a third language raises a variety of significant issues for primary education in general and for the Primary School Curriculum in particular. The primary curriculum was designed as an integrated learning construct. In principle each curriculum area is of equal importance, and all curriculum areas are compulsory. The curriculum does not espouse the concept of optional subjects. Therefore, if modern languages are to be introduced to the Primary School Curriculum they should be available to all pupils.

The INTO Education Committee recommends that consideration be given to the introduction of a combination language awareness/sensitisation programmes to all primary schools, as a means of ensuring pupils the experience of modern languages in the curriculum. There has not been sufficient research, experimentation or infrastructural development, to enable a more comprehensive language competency approach to be developed for all schools at present. Whereas much can be learnt from the experiences of other countries, the relevance of these experience to the Irish context must be taken into account.

A sensitisation/language awareness approach is deemed to be most suitable for Irish primary schools, in that it can be integrated into the existing curricular programmes in Language and in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE). There is a strong view among teachers that the current primary curriculum is

sufficiently demanding without the introduction of a separate modern languages programme. With appropriate teaching materials and resources and a comprehensive professional development programme, which would include language competency and pedagogical issues, a language awareness/sensitisation programme could be taught by all class teachers. A language awareness/sensitisation approach to modern languages in the primary school could also satisfy parental demands for the introduction of modern languages to the primary curriculum in that, according to the NPC, the principles for including a modern language relate to:

- 1 increasing children's cultural awareness by exposing them orally and aurally to different linguistic experiences;
- 1 broadening the children's horizons;
- 1 encouraging enlightened attitudes towards other cultures.

There are many advantages to the introduction of a language awareness/sensitisation approach in the present context. An integrated approach would support the integrity of the current curriculum. The integration of modern languages would not encroach on the current timetable, which is a major factor in terms of workload. Nevertheless, the additional work involved in both language awareness and sensitisation approaches cannot be underestimated either. Continuity with post-primary would not be an issue given that children would not have developed more than a basic competency in any modern language. It would be hoped that children would have developed positive attitudes and a disposition towards foreign language learning. The introduction of a national language awareness/sensitisation programme could lay the foundations for the introduction of a modern language competency programme in the longer term.

In order for a modern language language awareness-sensitisation programme to be successfully introduced in primary schools on a nationwide basis, there are a number of issues which would need to be addressed. Appropriate resources and materials in a number of modern languages, suitable for use at all class levels, would need to be developed. There is no reason why a modern language language awareness-sensitisation programme should be confined to senior classes, if suitable materials and guidelines are available to teachers. Professional development for all primary teachers including basic competency and pedagogical issues would need to be provided. The policy of providing teachers with opportunities to develop their linguistic competence in modern languages, should be continued. Ensuring that teachers enhance their own proficiency levels would help to build capacity in the system, with a view to considering the introduction of a competence based model of language learning at a later date, should circumstances change. However, the issues of when a modern language could be taught and whether language diversity should continue to be a

realisable objective remain. Competency in a modern language may need to become a pre-requisite for entry to colleges of education, and developing competence in modern languages and proficiency in teaching them will need to become an integral part of teacher education for all teachers. Following the introduction of a language awareness/sensitisation programme to all primary schools it may be possible to consider further developments. Schools involved in the current initiative should be facilitated in continuing the teaching of a language competence programme should they so desire. Their experience will further inform future decisions in relation to modern languages at primary level. However, facilitating such schools perpetuates the existing inequalities, in that only some pupils have access to such programmes.

## **Conclusion**

Children, parents and teachers appear to be positively disposed towards modern language learning generally at the primary level. Yet the research indicates very little advantage in an early start. The evaluation of the pilot project challenges primary teachers to decide between a language acquisition programme, a sensitisation programme and a language awareness programme. There needs to be some form of liaison with post-primary schools, regardless of model chosen, in order to ensure that the benefits of introducing some form of modern language learning at primary level continues through second level. The *Pilot Project Evaluation Report* (ITÉ 2002) appears to indicate a preference for the competence model at primary level. However, many teachers are of the view that a sensitisation model would be the most workable, in that it would take account of the time and integration factors, the preference of second-level language teachers, and relevant research. It is clear that further debate and discussion involving all partners is required before decisions are made in relation to generalising the teaching of any form of modern languages at primary level. In the meantime, there remains an urgent need to develop an overall official policy in relation to languages in schools, to provide a context for the purpose of, and approach to, introducing modern languages in primary schools.



# Part Two

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## Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

NOVEMBER 2003 – LETTERKENNY

THEME: LANGUAGE IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

**Chapter 6: Language Policy and Practice in the Classroom**  
*Muiris O’Laoire*

**EDUCATION COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS:**

**The Language Curriculum**

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**An Curaclam Gaeilge**

*Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official*

**Modern Languages in the Primary School**

*Emma Dineen, Education Committee*

**The Importance of Language**

*Anita Robinson*

**Chapter 7: Rapporteur Reports**





# Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

November 2003

## **LANGUAGE POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM**

Muiris Ó Laoire

IRCHSS Government of Ireland Research Fellow 2003-2004

### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the relationship between language practice and pedagogy in the case of Irish as L2 or L1. The study of Irish as part of the primary or post-primary curriculum espouses general educational aims that are laudable in themselves, (ie. an essential contribution to the emotional, aesthetic and cognitive development of the individual), independent of reference to learning the language for the utilitarian purposes of communication and for extending and developing bilingualism). Apart from the pragmatic dimension of learning language for the purpose of using it in the speech community, the Irish language is singled out in the curriculum as being an important vehicle through which students' cultural and linguistic heritage is mediated. Nonetheless, if we are concerned with extending bilingualism, the idea of learning language for language use in the context of bilingual settings and domains that characterise Ireland sociolinguistically needs to be discussed in terms of pedagogy.*

*As well as teaching and exposing our learners to language we, as teachers, need to equip them with skills in how to learn the language (and other languages) and how to seek out opportunities to use it outside the classroom. Such an approach can imbue teachers and learners alike with a new creative enthusiasm for language (not only Irish) in general, and create a language awareness that is facilitative of acquisition.*

## **Introduction**

Sometimes we tend to teach languages in a vacuum. As teachers, we concentrate consistently on promoting quality learning in the classroom, ensuring that our students are busily completing the tasks in the textbooks, giving them opportunities to practise the language, correcting homework and monitoring progress and development, and decrying our best efforts when our students apparently fail to acquire the language. We could be well forgiven, indeed, therefore, for failing to remember that we are in the business of teaching language. Language is for use in a speech community. In other words, apart from teaching literacy in English and in Irish as L1, we are in the business of getting children to acquire language, so that they will, at some point in the future use the language in the language or speech community. In other words, we are teaching Irish as a second language, so that our students will acquire the language and use it at some future time in the Irish language speech community in the Gaeltacht or outside the Gaeltacht.

It is clear that the study of Irish as part of the primary or post-primary curriculum espouses general educational aims that are laudable in themselves, (ie. an essential contribution to the emotional, aesthetic and cognitive development of the individual), independent of reference to learning the language for the utilitarian purposes of communication and for extending and developing bilingualism). Again, apart from the pragmatic dimension of learning language for the purpose of using it in the speech community, the Irish language is singled out in the curriculum as being an important vehicle through which students' cultural and linguistic heritage is mediated. Nonetheless, if we are concerned with extending bilingualism, the idea of learning language for language use in the context of bilingual settings and domains that characterise Ireland sociolinguistically needs to be discussed in terms of pedagogy.

## **Do we have a Language Policy?**

Do we have a language policy? We do, in fact have a tacit or implicit languages in education policy. We spend X number of hours teaching languages per week for X number of years. We teach only certain languages. We teach and examine languages in a certain way. But a more relevant question might be: have we a language acquisition policy? It is actually impossible to find such a policy articulated clearly and unambiguously. It would appear, however, that we did have such an acquisition policy at the inception of the State.

A language policy, defined by Cooper (1989) attempts to answer the following question: "What actors attempt to influence what behaviours of which people for what ends, under what conditions, by what means, through what decision-making process, with what effect?" The actors in our case are, of course, the state agencies traditionally involved in trying to add a second language and subsequent to the linguis-

tic repertoire of its citizens chiefly through the agency of the school with decision-making processes, which are not altogether transparent, and with, by and large unsatisfactory effects.

### **Early Language Acquisition Policies**

Briefly told, the government's strategy for the revival of Irish between 1922–1960 comprised a dual policy of maintenance and restoration, ie. maintenance of the spoken language in areas where it was still a community language (the Gaeltachtaí) and its restoration through reversal of language shift in all other areas.

Not surprisingly, the education system was designated as the major institutional means by which such a reversal would be achieved. The overall result of this language strategy by the early 1960s was an increase in the ratio of Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht and a decrease in the indigenous Irish speakers and users in the Irish speaking regions.

While schools conferred a high status on the language, there was a steadily growing disjunction between the energies invested in learning the language in the classroom and the absence of opportunities outside the classroom or school context for using Irish meaningfully within a speech community. This undermined the school speech community symbiosis that was at the heart of earlier developments and debilitated motivation for immersion-type schooling.

### **Acquisition Policy within the Context of Bilingualism**

A rethink in policy in the 1970s focused on language for use in speech community contexts. This is the new context of a societal bilingualism within which we still operate. Since the 1970s one looked to the schools for the steady and stable production of additive bilinguals. This appears to be the compelling motivation for learning the language in school. In other words, we are teaching Irish so that our students can participate in a bilingual society. The problem with this statement, however, is that there is no realistic measure or account of the amount of language that our students require to participate in the different language domains where Irish would be used or where Irish and English can be used, nor any idea of how a given competence or skill in the language, for example listening, can facilitate such participation. It was not obvious at the inception of such a policy in the 1970s, nor is it obvious thirty years later, what the domains of Irish language use were or are and how much Irish was to be taught and to what extent in order to ensure, at the very least, transactional communication within these domains.

Another important issue in this regard is the orientation of the school programmes towards integration of Irish speakers outside the school contexts into the Irish speak-

ing networks that comprise the speech community outside the Gaeltacht. If schools produce competent additive bilinguals, these bilinguals need to know how to be able to integrate into the Irish speaking clusters or networks. Indeed, the most important feature of a social network analysis of additive bilingualism concerns such openness to new members and the stability of such network membership over time. While there is some evidence from the sociolinguistic surveys and examination statistics that schools appear to be able to produce a small but perhaps steady proportion of Irish speakers with the potential to participate in Irish-speaking networks, such potential is often diffused and dissipated in the wider homogenous distribution of English speakers.

The problem in Irish language pedagogy in the past was the tendency for syllabus definition and language revival policies towards advancing bilingualism to occur more or less independently of one other. The new syllabus, which has communicative competence as well as Cultural Awareness and Language Awareness as its supporting pillars, offers an opportunity to re-align Irish language pedagogy and language policy. The organising principle for syllabus definition is to be more answerable to how, where and in what context the language is used in the Irish language speech community

## **The Communicative Syllabus**

The new curriculum offers a renewed opportunity to foster bilingualism. With the new syllabus, the community that uses the language, where the community uses the language, and the way the community uses the language must constantly be kept in view. If we are learning the language to communicate, we must know where to communicate (the domains) and with whom.

Communicative competence is what a speaker needs to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community. Thus, our teaching has been characterised by moving from an expository style, with a focus on form and grammar to a preparation or rehearsal for language use in the target language speech community, either in the Gaeltacht or in the networks of Irish language speakers outside it. This has considerable potential to promote and affect bilingualism. Within the new L2 curriculum, as well as listening to native and neo-speakers in a variety of interactions, learners' awareness of the language in a wide array of societal contexts can be heightened. The learning materials generally deployed reflect the language as the lived experience of the speech community. In textbooks, students see photographs of Irish signs, listen to TV and radio broadcasts and examine realia, all of which has the important potential of reinforcing and validating the idea of an existing bilingual society.

A second aspect of the new L2 syllabus worthy of mention here is the development of learning materials and textbooks for Irish that sought to present a modern vibrant

image of the language in use. Thus, it was not unusual in the early years of communicative language teaching in Ireland to find textbook tasks based on biographies of sport players, and music and film stars. These textbooks generally written by practising teachers resembled the general foreign language (FL) textbooks with the overall aim of making the language more enjoyable, accessible and interesting. It is also true to say that this approach abandoned a more traditional cultural content in favour of a 'glossy content' used in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and FL approaches. An important point needs to be made here. If one examines the content of the textbook, the context for language 'use' is not immediately apparent. In early textbooks, the context of such language use and practice so crucial to developing communicative tasks and learning materials was clear although sociolinguistically inaccurate and misleading. Here students were invited to suspend disbelief and to engage in rehearsing activities for use in everyday transaction situations all over Ireland, for example asking for directions in O'Connell St, Dublin's city centre. The contraction of social contexts and domains in which the language is used has narrowed the range of realistic settings exploitable in textbooks. Later textbooks were to adopt a more cautious approach with tasks set up in such a way as to simulate communication with an Irish speaker in a more credible authentic context. Many of the tasks do not specify the context, with typical tasks being devoid of a context of use.

Our learning materials, the exercises we practice now all have this essential community or societal functional perspective. Communication in the classroom is fun, but fun won't last if communication is ultimately seen to be devoid of its larger societal function

### **Challenges for the Communicative Syllabus**

This distribution of Irish speaking networks pose a serious problem for the learner of Irish, particularly within a communicative framework, where the relevance is wholly identified with societal use. For many schools, there is no readily identifiable speech community where such communication might be meaningful other than in communicational transactions in the Gaeltacht. The communicative-type syllabi now being taught in schools imply that learners who have little or no prospect of eventually integrating or enacting with the speech community are asked to suspend disbelief and rehearse communicative situations, which can only be authentic or valid within the Gaeltacht or in the Irish-speaking networks outside the Gaeltacht.

Efforts in our Irish language classrooms intent on simulating the tourist-type situations so central to communicative pedagogy of more widely-used languages have worn thin with many of our learners. It has been my experience that students have seen through the ruse, and that efforts to engage learners' motivation in mimicry of

communicative situations, such as booking a hostel in Cork, or asking directions while working from a map of O'Connell St, Dublin, have been doomed to arouse at best a benign indifference, even among our most eager learners.

Such an approach is suitable if it is geared towards learners who will want to, or who will have to, or who will choose to use Irish at some stage in their lives in the language speech community in the Gaeltacht. But does Irish language pedagogy prepare learners to integrate into the Irish language speech community outside the Gaeltacht if such were their choice?

It is not always easy to communicate or even to know how and when to communicate with Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht. This is often true in the case of adult learners who embark on an adventure of improving their cúpla focal (a few words) by attending night classes. Things go well until they try and integrate into a cluster of Irish speakers, then, things go horribly wrong! Learners at this crucial integration-threshold stage often think that their command of the language is not good enough and compare their own efforts unfavourably with the standard of the target network-group. Unfortunately, such learners often give up. This points to a need not only for more research into the sociolinguistic and motivational variables of integration but also for preliminary studies of interlanguage pragmatics in the case of Irish speakers. (The latter would be to provide data, for example on the nature of illocutionary acts among speakers belonging to the Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht speech communities).

What should we be teaching our students at primary and at post-primary levels? Is the communicative approach out of place, irrelevant and unhelpful for the majority of our learners who will never come into contact with the Gaeltacht speech community?

Many like Mac Aogáin (1990) would contend that the language tasks set within the Irish communicative framework should not always be designed to fit into some vision of an Irish-speaking community outside the school. The thinking here is that the new programme should fit into a model of language involvement that is meaningful for the students within the classroom setting. The CEB (Curriculum and Examination Board) document, which preceded syllabus definition, argued that the classroom itself must be used to motivate learners, at least in the short term (CEB 1985, p. 31), by creating a need to use Irish in the accomplishment of meaningful activities, which appeal to their interests and imagination. It states that: "the classroom is therefore a valid communicative situation, which can in itself be exploited as a valuable resource for learning. To view it merely as a rehearsal studio for the world outside is an approach unlikely to sustain the motivation of many learners of Irish." This approach, however, has sustained motivation for many of us teachers in the classroom (Ó Laoire 1994). The problem with this model is that if school is the only place that Irish is meant to be used then students, when school is out, forget Irish and see it as something

irrelevant. Irish like homework, rules and uniform is best forgotten outside school.

While schools are critical contexts for effecting language revitalisation in the context of bilingualism as well as being oriented towards language maintenance, schools on their own will not change language behaviours. A complication often is the different goals and definitions and measurements of success employed by different groups. Aims tend to vary considerably across groups.

1. One group may aim to just have the language being taught in the schools (one type of syllabus), and once it is being taught, they are happy.
2. Another group might aim to re-introduce the language in families and secure intergeneration transmission (an entirely different type of syllabus).

These two approaches would necessitate different syllabi. The former would aim to teach the language in some de-contextualised context or for cultural reasons, whereas the latter would stress learning the language for active use and for use in the micro-domain of the family itself.

Where, I wonder could we locate the teaching of Irish on this continuum?

Which brings me to my first question:

What are we really teaching the language for?

1. Short-term motivational fulfillment, ie. communicating in the classroom?
2. Learning the language to secure in the longer term the use of the language in family domains and secure thus secure intergeneration transmission.

Whatever the reason, I think that both aims can coalesce pedagogically. There is a big difference between language learning and language acquisition. Language that is learned may be forgotten, if it is not retrieved from short-term memory, or used or activated on a regular basis. Language that is acquired is automated or automatically available. It is possible to extend and drive interlanguage and fuel acquisition in the classroom if the language is used meaningfully. The communicative and purposeful use of language offers this opportunity. We not only need to give our learners practice in the language through scaffolding but create opportunities for our learners to meaningfully talk and therein process language. The more exposure to the language as in all-Irish immersion, and the more opportunities to use the language in a meaningful way, the better the chances of acquisition.

## **New Directions**

At the dawn of the new century the optimism that surrounded and informed the previous three decades of language teaching must be questioned. It seems to me that we

need to question what is achievable within the language classroom in the first instance.

As we begin to review the teaching and learning of languages in the curriculum (Little 2004), we may need to come to terms with the idea that the language is not fully teachable within the classroom context and that, as well as teaching and exposing our learners to language, we need to equip them with skills in how to learn the language and other languages, and how to seek out opportunities to use it outside the classroom. Such an approach can imbue teachers and learners alike with a new creative enthusiasm for language (not only Irish) in general and create a language awareness that is facilitative of acquisition.

To teach effectively, we may need:

1. a sense of where and how students can truly communicate both in the classroom and outside;
2. to be excited as teachers about these new pedagogical possibilities – ie not only teaching the language and exposing learners to opportunities in the classroom to use it meaningfully, but also teaching learners how to learn languages, what strategies to deploy, how to be good at language learning;
3. to be reflective practitioners – not only teaching the language but also observing and reflecting on how our learners are trying to learn it;
4. to be aware that all language learning is the same in instructed language acquisition contexts;
5. to worry less about the processes and methods of teaching and focus more on the processes of learning itself, the approach of the ELP, where learners reflect on what they learn, evaluate how they are learning, and diagnose where their efforts are going wrong.

Learners' exposure to Irish in our primary school classrooms has nearly always in the past been their first encounter with the learning of a second language. This is no longer the case, where students of for example Xosa, Zulu, Urdu, Hindi, Polish, Romanian, Yuroba, etc in our classrooms already have encountered English as a second language. Here we must appeal to their developing metalinguistic knowledge and use this as an opportunity to develop all the learners' metalinguistic knowledge and sensitivities. This is teaching language in the context of plurilingualism and multilingualism (Ó Laoire 2004).

Unless we want our citizens to be Anglophones, or unless we can declare the language to be dead, then this is a time for serious reflection and for open, creative debate. Tugaimis faoi le fonn!

## EDUCATION COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS

### Language in the Primary School

This section includes the three presentations by members of the Education Committee, which addressed the different aspects of language teaching in the primary school: English, Gaeilge and Modern Languages.

### The Language Curriculum – English

*Ted Motherway, Education Committee*

In the late eighties a British study sought to discover what indicator among young children best predicted their later success in reading. As well as checking the children the researchers also asked infant teachers to give their ratings of the predictors. One of the indicators was the children's level of oral language on entry to school. Not unsurprisingly, perhaps, most of the infant teachers plumped for oral language as the best predictor.

This study took place at around the same time the Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, *The Quinlan Report*, (1999) was published. It was the *Quinlan Report* which led to the setting up of the NCCA Committees which produced the revised curriculum. The principal term of reference of the NCCA committees was to implement the recommendations of Quinlan Report in each curricular area. The main recommendation in relation to English in the curriculum reflects the views of the infant teachers in the study mentioned earlier. It says that a revision of the English programme should "recognise the primacy of oral language in the English curriculum". It is stated later in the Report:

*"... in view of the importance of language for intellectual and social development and in view of the higher incidence of language problems among the disadvantaged, the Review Body recommends that additional resources to promote language development be provided on a preferential basis favouring disadvantaged communities."*

The view that language use and language interaction are paramount for both language learning and learning generally is reflected in the revised English curriculum, the implementation of which began in the school year 2000–2001. When the Review Body recommended a revision of the English programme with a recognition of the primacy of oral language in the curriculum it obviously hoped that the standard of literacy would be raised by the new approaches in the curriculum.

Reading standards are regularly monitored by national and international surveys and the results of the next national survey are due in 2004. This survey, and succes-

sive surveys, should provide some evidence of the success or otherwise of the new approaches. The effect of new approaches will, of course, depend on how these new approaches are implemented. The NCCA is in the process of reviewing implementation, and the Education Committee decided to conduct some focus group research on the extent to which the English curriculum is being implemented.

Before referring to the analysis of this research, however, I'd like to discuss some issues arising from the Review Body's recommendations, particular the notion of the primacy of oral language and the contention that there is a higher incidence of language problems among the disadvantaged.

If I go back to the survey which I referred to at the start, the infant teachers' opinion was that a child's oral language was the best predictor of success (or lack of it) at reading acquisition. But did the researchers find that the teacher intuition was correct? The answer from the British study (and from a similar study in the USA) is no oral language was not the best predictor. This finding is in keeping with the theories of theorists like Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker who believe that the brain has an innate capacity for language learning and that the language acquisition of young children cannot be explained in terms of imitation or teaching.

Theorists like Chomsky and Pinker would also consider that the notion that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who have non-standard dialects, for instance those of culturally deprived black American children, are grammatically deficient is a myth. Pinker claims that American black culture is, in his phrase "everywhere highly verbal" and that the linguistic abilities of people from disadvantaged backgrounds are badly underestimated. He claims that the conclusion that culturally deprived children lack true language was erroneously based on pupils' sullen or shy reaction to tests and testers.

These theories seem to be in conflict with the notion that social background is a reliable predictor of children's performance at school. One possible explanation for the link between social background and school performance could be related to ease of communication between teachers and children from different backgrounds. Researchers in Scotland, for instance, made a distinction between what they called 'chat' and 'information-giving speech'. They found that some children were incapable of telling researchers about even familiar events, and were difficult to understand. At the same time, these children, when they were observed chatting to each other were talkative, often witty, and seemed to suffer no problems of communication. It is worth noting that the findings in relation to 'chat' were consistent with Chomsky's views on the innateness of language acquisition, while the findings on information-giving highlighted the difficulties caused by children's everyday language and the use of language in schools.

The researchers also devised a programme to improve children's information-giving skills and the apparent success of the intervention suggests that pupils can be helped to become more articulate and fluent in their powers of self-expressiveness. The intervention also suggests that the information-giving skills which seem to be

essential for academic success do not come about naturally or inevitably. These findings have considerable relevance for the teaching of English in primary schools, and particularly for the teaching of oral language in the revised English curriculum.

As I said earlier, the Education Committee felt that it would be useful to establish the views of teachers on the extent to which areas of the curriculum, such as oral language, were being implemented, which elements they considered most successful, and least successful and any restraints or difficulties they were experiencing. To obtain this information it was decided to conduct some focus group research. There were ten groups: four with teachers in schools where English is the medium of instruction, three with teachers in Gaeltacht schools and three with teachers in gael scoileanna. Separate questions were prepared for each category of school.

It's not possible to go into details here about the findings but these are a summary of the main findings.

#### ENGLISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS

- 1 Teachers are not teaching the strands. They are sticking to the traditional divisions of oral language, reading and writing.
- 1 There is clear evidence of much more oral language activity than heretofore, including some information-giving activities, which are considered crucial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 1 Teachers had problems in planning discrete oral language activity.
- 1 In multi-class situations there was the particular problem that older children tended to dominate discussions.
- 1 Difficulties were encountered in assessing oral language.
- 1 Teachers have enthusiastically embraced the greater part of the new approaches to reading.
- 1 The class novel is in widespread use, and most commonly in conjunction with other reading matter.
- 1 In general, teachers are moving away from the class reader or core reader; some teachers still use it but supplement it with material of their own choosing.
- 1 In general, teachers have not yet embraced the approach to comprehension that is recommended in the *Teacher Guidelines for English*.
- 1 In some cases parents were not convinced of the value of the new approaches.
- 1 In general, children are being encouraged to write and are enjoying writing in the primary school.
- 1 There was evidence of misconceptions about the nature of redrafting in process writing. Teachers' conception of the purpose of redrafting was to correct technical mistakes in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

- 1 Teachers frequently found difficulty in motivating children to redraft their writing.
- 1 There was, in general, no evidence of the use of a multi-dimensional approach to the teaching of spellings.
- 1 The value of using word processing for the purpose of editing and redrafting was acknowledged.
- 1 Participants felt that future in-service in English would be more valuable now because teachers are now familiar with the terminology.
- 1 There was agreement that future in-service should include a large element of discussion.

#### GAELTACHT SCHOOLS

There were additional points raised by teachers in Gaeltacht schools and in gaelscoileanna.

- 1 In general teachers displayed less enthusiasm for the oral language element of the English curriculum than the other groups.
- 1 Teachers were experiencing difficulties in mediating the curriculum in a multi-class situation.
- 1 Dissatisfaction was expressed at the lack of materials available to support the teaching of oral English.
- 1 Participants felt that the curriculum was overloaded in Gaeltacht schools and that this militated against the approaches to reading being effectively taught.
- 1 There was evidence that teachers saw process writing as an exercise in correcting mistakes.
- 1 Participants expressed a desire for in-service education to address the mediation of the curriculum in the context of multi-class teaching.

#### GAELSCOILEANNA

- 1 On the whole the attitude of the group to the oral language element of the curriculum was positive.
- 1 Class readers were common but children were experiencing a greater variety of text.
- 1 The group was less than enthusiastic about process writing because they felt that writing, editing and redrafting were too time-consuming and tended to turn children off.

## **An Curaclam Gaeilge**

*Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official*

Tá an Ghaeilge á múineadh le blianta ag bunmhúinteoirí na tíre seo. Is fada muid ag gearán nach raibh curaclam nó cúrsaí oiriúnacha againn agus nach raibh áiseanna tarraingteacha, nua-aimseartha ann le tacú linn san obair seo.

Tá curaclam nua againn anois ó 1999. Chomh maith leis an teanga féin, tá feasacht cultúir agus feasacht teanga mar chuid den churaclam, toisc go bhfuil sé tábhachtach go mbeadh cur amach ag an bhfoghlaiméoir ar an dteanga féin agus ar an gcultúr as a n-eascaíonn sé.

Is é an rud is nua faoin churaclam Gaeilge ná go bhfuil sé bunaithe ar chur chuige cumarsáideach. Is cur chuige páiste-lárnach é seo. Dirítear ar riachtanais teanga agus foghlama an pháiste. Tá pacáistí tarraingteacha curtha le chéile ag na foilsitheoirí éagsúla chun tacú linn. Ba mhaith linn bhur dtuairimí ar an h-áiseanna seo a chlos. Má tá bearnaí fós ann, cuirigí sin in iúl dúinn.

Seo é an chéad uair freisin a tugadh aitheantas sa churaclam don chomhthéacs teanga difriúil atá sna scoileanna Gaeltachta, sna scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, agus sna scoileanna eile. B'fhéidir go bhfuil laigí sa churaclam ach fáiltimid roimh an dul chun cinn atá déanta.

Is dócha go bhfuil an curaclam Gaeilge á chur i bhfeidhm i ngach scoil nach mór anois. Thosaigh an próiseas seo cúpla bliain ó shoin i gcás na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus na scoileanna Gaeltachta, agus le déanaí sna scoileanna eile. Chinn an Coiste Oideachais an chéad chéim den taighde a rinneamar ar conas a bhí ag éirí leis an gcuraclam a dhéanamh le grúpaí múinteoirí sna scoileanna Gaeltachta and lán-Ghaeilge. Déanfar céim a dó, leis na scoileanna eile san Earrach, tá súil againn, nuair a bhíonn níos mó taithí ag na scoileanna ar an gcuraclam.

Tabharfaidh mé achoimire gairid ar na príomh rudaí a bhí le rá ag na múinteoirí Gaeltachta agus gaelscoile. Sa chéad áit d'fhéadfaí a rá go raibh cur chuige cumarsáideach i gcónaí in úsáid sa Ghaeltacht agus sna scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, toisc gurb í an Ghaeilge teanga cumarsáide na scoile de ghnáth.

An teachtaireacht is tábhachtaí atá ag na múinteoirí seo ná nach bhfuil cúrsa Gaeilge, áiseanna, nó leabhair léitheoireachta ann do mhúineadh na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht nó sna scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Bhí ar an INTO troid leis an Roinn Oideachais chun múinteoirí a scaoileadh saor chun tabhairt faoi chúrsa Gaeilge agus áiseanna oiriúnacha a chur ar fáil. Tá an-obair déanta ag na múinteoirí seo, agus tá clár do naíonáin bheaga sna scoileanna anois. Ach beidh tamall eile ann sula mbíonn clár agus ábhar ann suas go rang a sé. Tá sé deacair mar sin an curaclam a chur i bhfeidhm mar atá beartaithe. Conas is féidir fíorleabhair a úsáid don léitheoireacht nuair nach bhfuil siad ann?

Bhí roinnt múinteoirí buartha go mbeadh na cora cainte áitiúla á gcailliúint toisc nach mbíonn siad sna leabhair atá ar fáil faoi láthair. Seachas sin tá na múinteoirí sásta go bhfuil na straitéisí éagsúla teagaisc in úsáid acu agus níl deacracht acu leis na feidhmeanna teanga. Luaigh na múinteoirí gur mhaith leo níos mó treoir maidir le múineadh páistí le deacrachtaí foghlama. An ceart tacaíocht bhreise a chur ar fáil do na páistí seo i dteanga teagaisc na scoile nó i dteanga baile an pháiste. Tá impleachtaí ag an bhfreagra do thodhchaí oideachais agus do thimpeallacht teanga an pháiste.

Rinne na múinteoirí tagairt do thábhacht na timpeallachta. Bhí tagairt ag Muiris ó Laoire do seo freisin, mar a léirigh Joe Conway dúinn níos luaithe. Cad é an comhthéacs ina n-úsáidfidh na páistí an Ghaeilge atá á foghlaim acu ar scoil. Is ceist do gach scoil é seo. Lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht ní minic a bhíonn deis ag páistí an Ghaeilge a labhairt. Moltar sa churaclam, mar sin, gur féidir comhthéacs cumarsáide a chothú laistigh den scoil a thabharfadh deis do pháistí an Ghaeilge a chleachtadh.

Bhí múinteoirí bunscoile i gcónaí sásta tabhairt faoi mhúineadh na Gaeilge. Lorgaíomar curaclam nua: fuairéamar é. Lorgaíomar áiseanna tarraingteacha, nua-aimseartha: tá siad ann nó ag teacht. Lorgaíomar inseirbhís: fuairéamar é, agus tá seirbhís chuiditheoireachta againn chomh maith. Agus má tá tuilleadh tacaíochta uainn, lorgaimís é.

An ndéanfaidh an curaclam nua difir do mhúineadh agus d'fhoghlaim na Gaeilge? Ceist mhaith. Tá súil againn roinnt de na freagraí a chlos uaibhse inniu.

## **Modern Languages in the Primary School**

*Emma Dineen, Education Committee*

The Council of Europe has actively encouraged the development of language policies in member states in order to enhance the communicative competence of European citizens. In fact, the European Commission has stated that every citizen should be enabled to communicate in two languages other than his or her own. While the Revised Curriculum in Ireland does not include modern language teaching as such, both the White Paper in Education and the NCCA support the concept of children's exposure to the language, life and culture of our European neighbours. Consequently the NCCA recommended a pilot programme on language learning and in 1998, the pilot project in Modern Language in Primary Schools was born, supported by European Social Funding.

In the light of the recent recommendation of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) that funding be cut on this project, as it would not meet its target spend, it is worth noting that while over 1,300 schools applied to take part in this project in 1998, the Department of Education and Science (DES) confined participation to 270. This was understandable since it was after all a pilot project!

However, when the term pilot was dropped and the Modern Language Pilot Scheme was re-christened 'The Modern Languages Initiative', one might expect a substantial increase in numbers. However, this was not to be and the number of participating schools today is merely 347. Is it little wonder that spending targets cannot be met when participation is severely restricted? Moreover, since not all children are given a chance to partake, where is the equal exposure outlined and envisaged initially?

The important issues for us as educationalists are whether or not to seek an expansion of the current model of language competency or to look at alternative models. Currently, fifth and sixth class children are taught French, German, Italian or Spanish for one and a half hours per week by class or visiting teachers. Teachers use NCCA guidelines and teach Communicative Competence, Language Awareness, and Cultural Awareness. A level of proficiency is expected prior to entry into second level. The DES commissioned Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITÉ) to carry out an independent evaluation of the project and its findings were very positive, with "real progress" being made by pupils. Children found the communicative approach fun (maybe the lack of homework contributed to this), and teachers were generally very pleased. Almost two-thirds of teachers believed, however, that a special initiative was required to promote primary and post primary links.

The introduction of modern languages at primary level is based on the belief that the earlier the child is exposed to a second language the better. At this juncture I would like to acknowledge the ground-breaking research John Harris did in the document *Foreign Languages in the Primary School*, commissioned by the INTO in the early nineties. This research indicated that young children are no better than older children at acquiring a foreign language in a formal school context. In fact, studies in Britain and Canada indicate that it is the amount of time the child is exposed to the target language that is of significance, and that late starters quickly catch up. So do we need to start at ten years of age what secondary schools can do quite adequately at twelve? Studies on bilingualism also indicate that, while bilinguals outperform monolinguals in terms of divergent thinking, ability, and aptitude, parental and environmental support and economic factors are all vital ingredients in the motivation to learn a second language. One might diverge here somewhat to question whether, in the Ireland of 2003, Gaelge is not on the life-support machine of teachers, without the public injection of enthusiasm necessary for its survival. Will Irish survive if it is not relevant? Wu et al. in 1994 concluded that second language learners have to experience the "discourse demands of specific tasks" if they are to become proficient. Where do children get a chance to speak Irish in real living contexts today?

Interestingly, one of the reasons cited in Canadian research for the failure of early learners to maintain their advantage is the lack of coordination between primary and post primary programmes and teaching methodologies, as well as the inability of the latter to take account of learning at primary level and to adapt syllabi. Conversely in

Germany, where strict continuity was maintained between primary and post-primary, an advantage was noted for early learners. Forging links between both sectors is of paramount importance in the development of any future language programme in Ireland. Research in Canada indicates also, and this is borne out by *gaelscoileanna* in this country, that, irrespective of the starting age in the target language, the immersion model is the most successful one.

So what model do we propose? Because we already have ‘*dá-theangachas*’ (ie. *Gaeilge agus Béarla*), it could be argued that children are reasonably familiar with the benefits of second-language learning already and therefore a sensitisation and/or language awareness model in modern languages might, for a number of reasons, be a more viable route for primary teachers and students to tread.

Firstly they have more modest goals than a language acquisition model. Combined, they involve ‘taster experiences’ of a number of languages where basic competence is aimed at, as well as the development of cultural awareness and positive attitudes. Most primary teachers, with some refresher or foundation courses, would feel enabled to teach these programmes and time-tabling would not create such a difficulty since aspects could be taught under the umbrella of SESE, or incorporated into Language Time with a readjustment of the times allocated to English and Irish. Children would be exposed to more than one language (for example, senior classes might have one per term). Consequently, minority languages would be catered for and continuity with second-level would not pose a problem. Aspects of the language could be taught at different class levels. Schools would not feel under pressure to keep the ‘language teachers’ in the senior classes, or to make alternative arrangements when these teachers taught classes other than their own. While acknowledging the excellent work done by part-time visiting teachers, it is unlikely that such a system will be sustainable in the long-term. The class teacher is in the best position to teach a modern language as informal teaching can go on throughout the day and anyway the curriculum was designed as an integrated learning construct.

Since subjects are compulsory in the curriculum we need to look at the merits or demerits of a compulsory system. English language learning in countries such as Denmark and Sweden is compulsory from age nine or ten with much success. The Irish experience of compulsory language education does not meet with the approval of many, including parents. An awareness style programme would seem to fulfill parental expectations as outlined by the National Parents’ Council.

It is obvious that further debate and discussion is required and that is why we are here today, to consult with you on this issue. As you depart for your discussion groups, I would ask to consider the basic questions: whether modern languages, in any form, should be taught at primary level. If so, why? If not, why not? What approach should be adopted if they are taught: a competence model (where language is learned), a sensitisation model (where languages are encountered), or a general awareness model

(where the emphasis is on culture). These divisions incidentally are those outlined in the evaluation document.

How do we incorporate modern language teaching into the timetable, at what levels should it be taught and what in-service or resources would you, as teachers deem necessary.

In considering the implications long-term for language learning in general, is there an approach that could cross the divide between English, Gaeilge and modern languages? Is our future as a nation of language learners and teachers within a bilingual or multilingual context? While you deliberate, let us begin by calling on the government once again (as John Harris did ten years ago) to establish an official policy in relation to language learning in this country.

Go n-éirí libh. Beimid ag súil le bhur dtuairmí ar ball.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE**

### **(The Power of Story)**

*Anita Robinson – Verbal Arts Centre, Derry*

“The importance of language.” Well – in my opinion “importance” isn’t an important enough word to describe the importance of language. I speak from thirty years experience teaching in primary schools with a large proportion of disadvantaged children. Their direst poverty was poverty of language. Working in all kinds of schools over the last five years under the auspices of the Verbal Arts Centre and the Pushkin organisation, I regret to say has only revealed a woeful inadequacy in the most surprising places.

Language is the basic tool of communication. We live in an era of mass communication, yet our young people seem ever less adept at making their opinions and feelings known. There is a generation of children coming to school with purely functional language – and sometimes barely that. These are not the children of the television age. They are its grandchildren. Where do we start with a child admitted at four years ten months who can say nothing but “Me dood boy.”

If parents didn’t feed, wash or clothe their children they’d be had up for criminal neglect, but no-one is policing parental attitudes to language development. There’s no-one to see how they squander that never-to-be-repeated opportunity to lay the foundations of an articulate future. By the time many a child gets to school, four precious years of language opportunity have been wasted and the child is already inured to passivity – babysat by television and video, meals eaten in silence in front of a soap opera and, by way of creative pastime, a trip up town to trail aimlessly round a shopping mall, have a ‘Happy Meal’ (there’s a misnomer) in McDonalds and come

home to more of the same.

How did it get to be like this? Parents start out meaning well. They do all the goo-goo gaa-gaa stuff when the baby's new and a novelty. Once the initial euphoria's over and they have a series of broken nights and both come home exhausted from work, they discover in short order that the moving images on a TV screen exert a magically soothing effect on their fractious infant. Unless they're paying for trained professional child-minding (and how many can afford that?) it's likely the neighbour woman down the street who does it for pin-money will have their child clocked in front of her TV for a significant proportion of the day too.

The days of granny living across the road are gone, and anyway gran's no longer a little old soda-bread baking lady, but blonde, glamorous and probably out at bingo or still working herself. So the child's reared against a one-way barrage of noise, movement and colour in which there is no chance of exchange – nobody to listen. To develop language skills children don't need to be talked at, but be part of a legitimate and fruitful dialogue. But nobody has time to listen, neither parents nor carers, nor increasingly, teachers.

This pre-school failure to thrive in language puts an insuperable burden on the early years teacher who has, on the one hand, a structured curriculum with all its ambitious targets and expectations, and on the other, a bunch of kids who are not likely to come within a hound's growl of meeting them without divine intervention.

So what do we do? Compensate, compensate, compensate. How? I'll get to that in a minute. The imagination of a child is like one of those big stone jars Christ used at the Marriage Feast at Cana. From birth it begins to be filled with language, experiences, images, ideas, sounds, colours, rhythms, stories, poems, songs, rhymes, drama, and as s/he progresses through his or her young life and education, this reservoir is constantly being topped up by stimulating teachers and committed parents, so that when s/he's called upon, for example, at the age of nine or ten to do a piece of creative writing, s/he has a well of riches to delve into. This is the theory. The reality is many children come to school empty vessels. They used to be able to bless themselves, dress themselves and know a handful of nursery rhymes, but not anymore – and unless we as teachers address that lack, all the way through their school careers, they'll be dipping a bucket into an empty well. What I'm talking about is not basic curriculum issues but the 'added value' only an imaginative, energised and committed teacher can give them – a teacher to whom language matters personally – a teacher who is passionate in his or her belief that their pupils should be able to express themselves articulately, vocally and on paper, should read expressively, should read not only for comprehension but enjoyment, should not only be aware of, but relish the sound, the music, the colour, the playfulness of words, should be able to master them and make them their own. Every child ought to have the peerless privilege of being transported out of the dull everyday, out of themselves, by the power and the magic

of words. I'm quite likely to burst into tears with my own conviction at this point.

Even if they go home to a book-free zone where their bedtime story is the latest episode of *Eastenders* and nobody bothers to ask them what they did at school today – they have had a golden few moments of being listened to, their talk valued, and their day coloured bright by the magic of story and poetry.

My friend Liz Weir the story-teller – a lady well-known to many of you – Liz and I attended a conference together once. At one point before I got up to speak she leaned over and scribbled something on my notes which read, I thought, “Children ought to be stoned to death”. (Not a bad idea considering the problem class I'd left behind that day.) “What?” I whispered. Oh! I see. “Children ought to be storied to death.” She's right of course – feed them! Stuff them with the pate de fois gras of language till they're OBESE with it, full to bursting. “But when are we going to have the time to do all this?” I hear you ask. Ah yes. There's the rub!

The strictures and structures of the National Curriculum have (in the Northern discipline at any rate) gradually squeezed out the opportunities for such indulgence. Thirty years ago, there was a young teacher in Creggan, not at that time the pleasantest or safest of environments. One morning a rainbow appeared outside the classroom window, vivid and complete. All day long we ran with the rainbow. We talked, we sang, we read stories and poems about rainbows, we painted pictures, made a collage (complete with pot of gold), we colour mixed, looked at prisms and blew bubbles. Nowadays you have to stop all that and do science because it's eleven o'clock.

We passionate teachers are having to steal time, snatching a few precious minutes here and there, to create 'value added' slots. For example, keep a poetry anthology to hand so at a lesson junction you can pick a child at random and say 'When's your birthday?' "Eighth of July, Miss." "Listen up everybody. Here's Julie's birthday poem. Children with Adults – John Hegley."

My auntie gives me a colouring book and crayons

I begin to colour

After a while she looks over to see what I've done and says

"You've gone over the lines

That's what you've done

What do you think they're there for, eh?

Some kind of statement is it?

Going to be a rebel are we?"

I begin to cry

My uncle gives me a hanky and some blank paper

"Do your own designs" he says

I begin to colour

When I've done he looks over and tells me they're all very good  
He's lying. Only some of them are.

How long did that take? You can read it twice in the space of one minute – and give the child a photocopy of it to keep. Maybe you'll be discussing reminiscence as a trigger for writing. Drop in a little story to help focus them along the right lines.

Mum said "Let's go." So we went – out of the house and into the dark – and I saw the moon. We went over the field and under the fence and I saw the sea in the moonlight, waiting for me. Mum said, "Take off your shoes and socks". And I did. And I ran and Mum ran. We ran and we ran straight through the puddles and out to the sea. I went right in to the shiny bit. There was only me in the big, big sea. I splashed and I laughed and mum came after me and we paddled out deep in the water. We got all wet. Then we walked a bit more by the edge of the sea and our feet made big holes in the sand. Far, far away, right round the bay, were the town and the lights and the mountains. We felt very small, Mum and me. We didn't go to the town. We just stayed for a while by the sea. And Mum said to me, "Remember this time, it's the way life should be." I got cold and Mum carried me all the way back. We sat by the fire, Mum and me and ate hot buttered toast and I went to sleep on her knee. I'll always remember just Mum and me and the night that we walked by the big, big sea.

Less than two minutes to tell and it's a true story (Martin Waddell, Newcastle Co Down). I used it once with fourteen year olds. They all thought it was brilliant – till they spotted the book. "But it's a baby book!" they cried. "Does that alter your opinion of the quality of the story?" I asked them.

Having spent most of my teaching life with the spontaneous unselfconscious five-to-eleven age-band, I find the monosyllabic grunting adolescent very tough going. It takes weeks to hook them in and get a response. You can see their eyes brighten with engagement and appreciation but they haven't the vocabulary to express verbally what they want to say. They struggle through a half-formed sentence and then shrug in frustration and fall silent.

Doesn't every set of statistics you see emphasise that the articulate teenager suffers less angst, has a stronger self-image, and a greater sense of self-worth? What sort of system has let them limp through this far, disabled by lack of language? Well, we've blamed indifferent parenting, poor discipline, junk food, an entertainment-oriented society and the retreat from organised religion; but what about the schools?

Since I ran away from full-time teaching in the past three years I've worked in thirty schools, primary and secondary, on a programme of language development through the medium of story, poetry and creative writing. This was a service free to schools in

the WELB (Western Education Library Board) area. All they had to do was sign up. Six of us facilitators (teachers, writers, storytellers) delivered this programme to ten schools, each working continuously with a single class and its teacher over a series of fortnightly visits – eight sessions with the children, two with the whole staff of the school. By and large it was a wonderful experience, but you did run up against the odd problem. Since it was generally the principal who allocated you to a particular class, you might find yourself with a very good teacher, a fount of creativity already who patently didn't need you, or you were foisted on a perceived-to-be-weak teacher who resented your presence. Sometimes you fetched up in the most troublesome class in the school as a sort of entertainment.

Teacher attitudes to the project differed widely. Most embraced it with enthusiasm, joined in wholeheartedly, did the consolidation and extension work between visits, and celebrated a body of children's writing at the end of it. Some teachers saw it as an opportunity to skive off, mark books, or fiddle on the computer at the back of the room. Between visits their children wrote little or nothing, and what they did was without teacher direction. Children took their cue from the teacher; the project, the work and I were valued by the yardstick he or she set.

There is a thing called Dead Teacher Syndrome and if you go into as many classrooms as I do, the symptoms of it are easily spotted. This is Miss Moribund's room. She's clinging to an outmoded reading scheme or unwillingly implementing a new one by the methods of the old. There's nothing on her library shelves published post 1980. She is unaware of the huge explosion in the last ten years of quality writing for children, both prose and poetry. Names like Anne Fine, Jacqueline Wilson, Geraldine McCaughrean, Kit Wright, Michael Rosen, Roger McGough, and a hundred others mean nothing to her. She knows Eleanor Farjeon though and still thinks "mice are rather nice", but her children never write poetry because she's afraid of it, and not quite sure how to teach it. Most unforgivable of all, she is reading aloud a chapter at a time Marita Conlon McKenna's *Under The Hawthorn Tree*. Gawdelpusall!

Here is a true story. Some years ago, myself and a storyteller were dispatched from the Verbal Arts Centre to the Glens of Antrim one brilliant bitter March day to give first aid to a class participating in a creative writing scheme and not making much of a fist of it. Once we arrived we realised why. They had a dead teacher. They'd made a few half-hearted attempts at interpreting a jungle theme. NB, this was the village of Armoy in the heart of the Glens of Antrim. "What is it ye want the wanes tae do?" said the teacher in a tone of limp compliance. "Who's the most famous person around here?" I asked. "Please Miss, Joey Dunlop," chorused the class (Joey Dunlop, champion motorcycle rider, now deceased.) They all appeared to be closely related to Joey Dunlop by either blood or marriage. "And what team does he ride for?" "Please Miss, the Armoy Armada". "I wonder what the word Armada means? Why would it be used in these parts?" No answer. Zilch. Nada. One mile away over the crest of the hill

beyond the school was the sea and the site of the wreck of the Spanish galleon Trinidad Valencera, and a few miles beyond, the treasure ship Girona. They'd never heard of them. I needn't tell you the storyteller and myself cleared off to Cushendun at lunchtime for a couple of stiff g and ts to give us strength for the afternoon session.

Writers begin by writing about the things they know, that are relevant or significant to them, part of their personal experience. Of these they can speak truly. The North Antrim plateau might once have supported a tropical rainforest but it wasn't in their time or mine!

What we aim for in children's talk and writing is what the Pushkin model calls the authentic voice of the child – not a set of sterile exercises done to meet teacher expectation. It's asking a great deal of a child to demand that s/he 'write from the heart' but the Pushkin organisation has proved over fifteen years it can be done superbly well. The Pushkin ethos is a nourishing, nurturing one that can be borrowed by anyone. It is not exclusive. Children's language skills and confidence are fostered by sending artists, poets, storytellers, musicians and writers into schools. They bring new approaches, generate enthusiasm, and leave a legacy of joint achievement, but one-off visits can be little more than entertainment with no lasting effects.

Pushkin not only coaches teachers in language enhancement strategies for use in the classroom but gets them writing too. For some it's like pulling a cork out of a bottle, a rush of creativity. While I'm not in any sense giving you a hard sell, I can only say that my involvement with Pushkin, which began fifteen years ago, transformed my teaching, and I've seen it transform others.

I spent three days last week in St Mary's Teacher Training College Belfast (my own old alma mater) workshopping first, second and third years prior to their going out on teaching practice. These are a television-reared generation all right. They were willing, enthusiastic and almost completely devoid of any knowledge of traditional fairy stories. *Genie in a Bottle*? Never heard of it. *Rapunzel*? Who? *The Little Mermaid*? Oh yes – the bastardised Disney version, the integrity of the story destroyed, that bears no relation whatsoever to the cruel beauty of the Hans Christian Andersen original.

I picked up a version of the *Children of Lir* in Donegal town lately – with a happy ending where they're all restored to youth and beauty! Political correctness gone mad! Anyway apart from J.K. Rowling and Philip Pullman, none of the students had a goat's notion of new writing for children. I'm suggesting to you that you can add value to the quality of your language-teaching through the medium of story and in story I include poetry which is, after all, only a story distilled to its essence. A story is a wonderful Gladstone bag of teaching strategies.

For a start STORY IS CENTRAL to our society. Since caveman Ugg communicated with his lady wife Ugga, to the most sophisticated exchange in the most select intellectual salons, people have been telling each other stories. The mother of a newborn baby talks to him all the time. "Where's my lovely wee dimply dumply pet

then? He's here so he is." She's supplying both halves of the conversation – a habit many women cannot relinquish. In a sense every mother starts her child's story HIS-STORY and hopefully gives him the power to continue the story for himself.

I believe in the POWER of story. Stories tell us what to believe. Stories are how we receive our information. We are subject every day to the FACT and FICTION of stories – the FACTUAL, ostensibly news, current affairs and the media – the FICTIONAL, a multiplicity of genres from thrillers to advertising – though looking at some of the current headlines you wonder if journalism ought to be included too. Add gossip, scandal and propaganda and there you have our entire history. You see, you can teach anything through the medium of a story. Children assimilate subconsciously the art of sequencing thought (ordered thinking), putting shape on an idea (a pattern or blueprint) for their own writing, beginning, middle and end, and discipline – polishing and refining till the story is the best they can make it.

Telling stories, writing stories, reading their own or others' stories, they come to terms with the world and their place in it. They develop coping strategies and a growing confidence and sense of self-worth.

I believe in the BEAUTY of story – its dimension. You can go round the world without leaving your chair – sample other cultures, other customs. Story forms have the beauty of mathematics, exquisite language, vivid runs of phrase – the DIGNITY and PRIDE of a PEOPLE told in their own SPEECH PATTERNS – think of India, the Native Americans, and of course we Irish ourselves. Story gives you the opportunity to form respect for both the ancient and modern. The formality of Charles Perrault fairytales and the anarchy of Spike Milligan co-exist with equal validity.

The daily STORY READING OR TELLING PERIOD is vital. I should like to make it COMPULSORY in every year from nursery class up to university students. Never mind what else is skipped in the course of the day, that period should be sacrosanct. At the very least it will take the non-achiever out of him/herself- one non-competitive shining space in his day. But a story is a sterile exercise if its not surrounded by an atmosphere of expectation, excitement, enjoyment. It's a jumping off point for development of the imagination. When a story ends – it's not the end, it's the beginning – not a closing but an opening up of rewarding discussion - a trigger to new ideas as well as an exploration of the ideas in the story – a relishing of rhythm or rhyme – a tuning of the ear to the music of words.

*“Once upon a time there were seven washerwomen. Every day they went down to the river with their baskets of washing on their heads. Their names were Dottie, Lottie, Molly, Dolly, Winnie, Minnie, and Ernestine and they were all good friends. When they got to the river they sorted out the clothes and plunged them in. They soaked them. They soaped them. They pounded them on the stones. They rinsed them. They wrung them. They hung them out to dry.”*

Great!

Look, I can only recommend what works for me and the many other teachers from whom I've plundered effective ideas.

- 1 Children LOOK but don't SEE. They HEAR but don't LISTEN. Train them to OBSERVE CLOSELY – to look with NEW EYES, listen with NEW EARS, to NOTICE the little unregarded things.
- 1 Not every story or poem is for in-depth analysis. Don't dissect beauty. Read or listen, enjoy, pass on.
- 1 Give children PRIDE OF OWNERSHIP in their talk and writing. Encourage the courtesy of listening when someone speaks or reads their work.

When I was a real teacher, I kept a miniature lectern by my desk. When the creative writing period was over I'd ask for two or three children to read. It was a purely voluntary exercise. Sometimes one, not satisfied with that day's effort would say "Not today teacher!" Even the slow-to-record took part. "But I'm not finished Miss". "Read what you've got and talk the rest of the story." They did and were clapped to the echo. You should have seen those P4s and P5s at the parliamentary dispatch box looking proudly round waiting for attention. Wait for every eye and ear to be on you. Then begin. If anyone wanted to make a suggestion how the work might be improved it had to be counterbalanced with a compliment. It took about seven minutes in all. A story or poem in a copybook is a dead thing. You must open the book and let it fly – be seen and heard by as many people as possible.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think I have delighted you long enough. Let me sum up like this:

The child who has nothing to say has nothing to write. He has in fact nothing much.  
He's relegated to the sidelines of life – a watcher at the feast.  
He's deaf to the power of words,  
He is dumb in the use of words.  
He is undernourished for the want of words.  
Don't let the children you teach go home hungry at the end of the day.

# 7

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## Rapporteur Reports

### ENGLISH

The overall impression from the rapporteurs' reports was that there was goodwill towards the amended English curriculum. There was general agreement that the goals implicit in the English curriculum were worth achieving even though there were a number of factors which made it difficult to achieve these goals.

The area of the English curriculum which came in for most criticism was the lay-out of the curriculum in strands and strand units. Discussion groups felt that the terminology of the strands was confusing, not user-friendly, unnecessary, and difficult for teachers who were writing schemes of work.

There was a welcome for the emphasis on oral language and the importance of teaching oral language was recognised. One group stressed that oral language teaching was vital in schools designated disadvantaged. This group felt that the targeting of parents through the provision of Home School Community Liaison (HCSL) programmes would be beneficial in raising awareness of the need for oral language activities. This group also stressed the importance of listening skills and alluded to the problems caused by the middle-class language of school, which is often beyond the experience of many children in disadvantaged areas.

There was agreement that the variety of texts available in the teaching of reading was suitable for readers at all ability levels. There was a particularly warm welcome for the use of class novels. One group commented that the children loved novels like *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Faraway Home*, and that some class novels were so popular that even the parents were reading them.

It was widely agreed that even though there is a wealth of reading material available, the children need to be motivated to read the available material. One group spent a great deal of time discussing suggestions for motivating children to read. These suggestions included story board, reading time, story time, interviews, and reading for an audience. There was a welcome for the trend in modern textbooks to have extracts from children's literature. The extracts encouraged children to read the full stories in school libraries or in local libraries.

The groups recognised that there were difficulties with the approach to the teaching of writing in the English curriculum, particularly in relation to redrafting. It was felt, however, that redrafting was an important skill and that the process approach was much better than a reliance on workbooks. There was agreement on the importance of attention to grammar, punctuation and spelling in final drafts, but not as the main initial focus.

There was agreement that full implementation of the English curriculum would present a number of challenges. The biggest challenge may be finding time for all of the areas of the curriculum. Lack of resources and funding, large classes, the need to educate parents, and the difficulties which some children face with the language of schools were all seen as challenges. There was agreement that teachers could be helped to meet these challenges if additional in-service education and professional development were provided now, when teachers have experienced the revised curriculum.

Overall, there was a broad welcome for the revised curriculum and it was noticeable that when groups were discussing areas of difficulty they tended to seek solutions to overcoming difficulties rather than criticising the approaches advocated in the revised curriculum.

## **GAEILGE**

### **After nearly a century of striving and two million teaching hours each week, does the current status of Gaeilge in our schools and in society reflect these efforts? And why is this the case?**

It was, generally, accepted that the status of Gaeilge in our schools and in society does not reflect the efforts made to teach Gaeilge. There were a number of reasons put forward including a lack of parental interest in general and negative attitudes of some parents and of some teachers, which are passed on to the children. It was also stated that standards of proficiency and fluency have fallen among teachers, and that teachers were treated less favourably than civil servants who (it was claimed) can be given a week's course in a Gaeltacht area at no expense to themselves. Teachers also found it extremely difficult to get guidelines from the Department of Education and Science, leaving the onus on themselves. It was thought that standards had fallen since the Buntús was done away with. According to many teachers, Buntús was an easy to use, well-structured programme, whereas the new curriculum required a lot more work on the part of the teacher. The need to use Irish outside the classroom was commented upon, as Irish becomes compartmentalised if not used outside the classroom. Pupils had no motivation or no need to learn Irish, which leads to a lack of

interest. It was thought that Irish as a second language was not relevant in Irish society and that society was not interested – too busy being European to be Irish. The lack of immersion in the language was mentioned, and the view was expressed that, traditionally, there had been too much coercion, reading and writing were introduced too soon, and there was too much emphasis on correction of grammatical structures and not enough on fluency. Some pupils had difficulties with the different ‘canúintí’ (dialects). The lack of resources for teaching Gaeilge was referred to. It was thought that TG4 was too long in coming and needed to be promoted more. It was recommended that tapes of the cartoons shown on TG4 should be made available or sold to schools.

Comparisons were made with Wales and Israel. It was felt that when a country is denied its nationality it values its language. It was agreed that, since Ireland had got back its nationality, the government has not given Gaeilge the esteem it merits. Rather, it was thought that the government was guilty of tokenism and of paying lip service to the language.

On a more positive note the success of the scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge was noted. However, one group felt that the rise in the number of schools did not reflect a renaissance in the language. It was felt that it was a social class issue and that some of these schools were springing up because they were seen as trendy. Another group questioned the effectiveness of the time devoted to Gaeilge. However, they were greatly assured by John Harris that children who came together from Irish medium and English medium schools closed any initial gap in the use of Irish following a month in an Irish-speaking environment. It was agreed that, while it may not be apparent that the Irish language was acquired, children and parents had a large store of the language. There was agreement that if you give children the right experience Irish will thrive.

Teachers in one group spoke of their experiences of teaching in other countries. For example, in Japan the minimum age for starting school is six years. No reading or writing of a second language is done until post-primary school. The emphasis is on acquiring oral skills. Their English levels tend to be better than Gaeilge levels in Ireland. In Norway, people have a great command of the English language – strong on oral skills. As they have a lot of visitors and tourists they have plenty of opportunities to practise the language. In Wales, Welsh people speak their own language in shops, schools, workplaces and homes. They appear to have a very positive attitude. It is also part of their school policy that there must be a Welsh aspect to all subjects across the curriculum. They seem to have a great success rate.

## **How can we inculcate an enthusiasm and interest in all aspects of language learning, including mother tongue and second language?**

Delegates highlighted the importance of enthusiasm, stating that teachers transferred their own enthusiasm in areas such as place-names, culture, stories, music, and theatre. It was thought that there was a synthesis between teachers' own enrichment as teachers and what goes on in the classroom. It was recommended that children should be allowed to speak Irish without constant correction and that pupils be given time to speak the language. Other suggestions included role-play, drama, puppets, interviews, puppets, newsletters, circle time, thinking time, and TV/ video/ popsongs. It was also recommended that teachers read aloud to the class and ask pupils to formulate questions on text, and that the language should be made fun and relevant to children in a practical way. Participants also emphasised the importance of language for learning. The need to create a positive attitude, especially in circumstances where there was a negative home attitude, often from the age of eight onwards, was highlighted, as was the need to seek the support of parents. One teacher suggested that the immersion approach was the only approach that worked. Another suggested that Irish reading should be left until fifth and sixth classes and another proposed the removal of Irish from the curriculum. In general, teachers were of the view that the approach to teaching Irish should be child-centred and that a broad range of methodologies should be used.

## **What are the challenges for pedagogy in the context of extending bilingualism or multilingualism in the community?**

One group agreed that many parents and teachers were questioning why children were being taught Gaeilge at all. Parents often felt that it was a waste of time and many teachers were of the view that they were only teaching it because it was a requirement of the State. It was thought that there are many great Gaeilge speakers out there who did not 'love' the language. Teachers needed support in developing their own language skills, and that further in-service and resources were required. It was suggested that oral language classes be provided for parents, and that phrases/ words of the week be listed in weekly newsletter and displayed at school. It was stated that pupils learn the language better if some other subject is taught through the medium of Irish. At present there is no urgency to learn the language. Real opportunities need to be created for the use of Irish, and pupils need to have positive role models – Irish must become 'cool'. It was recommended that the language must have a context founded in its native culture, and should be seen as part of a wider experience of Gaelic culture that included music, dance and sport. It was felt, in one group, that groups such as the GAA, could do a lot more to promote the language. A great many young people hero-worship footballers and hurlers, and the government should be enlisting the help of

such people through grants and incentives. It was further suggested that the chambers of commerce could be used to extend language programmes between communities and schools, perhaps promoting native speakers and singers who would also share their talents with the schools. Leadership from the top and the promotion of the language through the organs of the State was required to motivate pupils.

It was also thought that the emphasis on oral language at primary level did not continue into secondary education, and questions were raised as to why the proficiency levels at primary level were not reflected in Junior and Leaving Certificate results? It was suggested that there may need to be a policy change regarding oral language at second level.

It was recommended that an enterprise group who would constantly produce and upgrade materials as well as regenerate ideas should be established.

Other views included the possibility that children with special needs and those struggling with literacy (around the tenth percentile) should be exempt from learning Irish.

In one group examples of different models involving the community were given, which included:

- 1 a disadvantaged school where there was a big uptake by parents on learning Irish;
- 1 involving parents in supporting children who had been asked to do a task in Irish at home;
- 1 asking children to give an Irish name to their homes in collaboration with parents;
- 1 making a video of the class doing Irish and sending it home.

### **Cén difeir a dhéanfaidh an curaclam nua Gaeilge do mhúineadh na Gaeilge maidir le caighdeán labhartha na Gaeilge, tuiscint ar an teanga, léitheoireacht agus scríbhneoireacht? Cén difeir a dhéanfaidh sé maidir le suim na ndaltaí?**

There was a general consensus that the new schemes and materials were enjoyable for children. However, it was stated that it will take time for the new approaches to work their way up through the school, and that it will be difficult at present to use the new approach with senior classes. It was thought that the next generation of parents may not be as negative, but that it will take a long time to reap the benefits. It was agreed that the standard of oral Irish should improve, although lack of continuity into second level was counter productive since there was not enough emphasis on oral language. Delaying the start of reading until second class was welcomed, and it was felt that Gaeilge would be more enjoyable and more relevant. Children will become more used to listening to the language and may tune in more easily to TG4. However, the teach-

ers were of the view that the new approach requires a lot of preparation on the part of the teacher. It was considered a great curriculum but that there was a need for more resources – tapes and visual resources – as it was too time-consuming to prepare. It was also stated that teachers need to be heard speaking the language among themselves and that special needs assistants also need to be heard speaking Irish. One delegate raised the issue of whether less emphasis on grammar could cause difficulties in the future.

### **Cad iad bhur gcuid riachtanais inseirbhíse maidir le cur i bhfeidhm an churaclaim Gaeilge?**

It was stated that a lot could be gained from teachers speaking Gaeilge to each other as a matter of routine as it would improve fluency and teachers would be seen as role models. It would also help if pupils could be exposed to native speakers as often as possible. The Cuiditheoirí could be used for this purpose, though some schools stated that they had yet to have a service from a cuiditheoir. It was also recommended that teaching packs which were made available to scoileanna lán-Ghaeige should be made available to all schools. Dictionaries need to be updated to include all the new terms. There was general agreement that additional in-service education was required.

## **MODERN LANGUAGES**

The discussion groups resulted in a wide variety of views being expressed. Some teachers were supportive of the introduction of a modern language, especially those who had experience of the pilot project in their schools and/or those who had completed diploma courses in languages. Motivation came from the fact that children were now going abroad regularly on holidays. Twinning with European cities also provided opportunities for trips to France and other places on the continent. European awareness and multiculturalism, it was agreed were implicit in any modern teaching classroom, and therefore the Sensitisation Model appeared to be most favoured. Teachers had some reservations however as to whether an early start was necessary and how much children might learn if only ‘a little of everything’ was done.

A call was made also to raise awareness in disadvantaged schools of the need for a modern language. Others feared that the system was merely facilitating “the upper third” in every class, ie the language learners. A certain level of proficiency would be required of teachers and special training or specialist teachers were deemed necessary. The question was posed regularly as to the need for yet another subject in an already overcrowded curriculum. In general, it would appear that teachers voiced a high level

of resistance to the adoption of another subject, citing lack of time, curriculum overload, lack of monetary recompense, and the need to spend more time on existing language subjects as reasons for saying no to another subject being foisted upon them. Concern was expressed also at the lack of planning and coordination between primary and post-primary. 'Enough is enough' was a theme enunciated regularly. Questions were posed around the feasibility of catering for the increasing number of children with special needs in the context of a modern language.

In terms of which model was most favoured, while the sensitisation model had much support, due, it appeared, to the perception that it was more interesting, less pressurising, and easier all round for teachers to teach, the competency model also had its supporters. Many teachers felt children liked learning a new language and to enable them to take part as European citizens teachers needed to make them competent. Existing language teachers could up skill others. It was felt that 'No one size fits all', so schools should be free to choose the model. While liaison with second level schools was vital, many teachers felt that these schools would prefer that the teaching of a modern language should be left to them, and that primary schools should concentrate instead on children's competency in other areas of the curriculum. A Northern Ireland delegate reminded teachers that the revised system there proposed clear links between Key Stage Two (upper primary education) and Key Stage Three (the first three years of post-primary education) in all subject areas. The fun element in language teaching in schools was applauded and all agreed that children thoroughly enjoyed the methodologies employed by the teachers.

Overall, no clear consensus emanated from the discussion groups. Yet, the frank and open views expressed were welcome and thought provoking.



# Part Three

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## Analysis and Conclusion

### **Chapter 8: Analysis and Conclusion**

**English**

**Gaeilge**

**Language and Socio-Economic Disadvantage**

**Teaching English as a Second Language**

**Modern European Languages in Primary School**

**A Coherent Language Strategy for Schools**





# Analysis and Conclusion

The title of this publication, *Language in the Primary School*, is of considerable significance. Past INTO publications and research papers have dealt with different aspects of language and language teaching in primary schools; this is the first attempt on the part of the organisation to address the issue of language and language teaching as an entity. As such, it represents an important contribution to the conviction, nowhere more strongly expressed than in Dr David Little's paper, *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum: A Discussion Paper*, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and available on its website, that it is no longer either acceptable or useful to address the different aspects of language and language teaching, be that English or Irish or the methodologies we espouse in teaching these, as discrete concerns.

George Steiner has memorably characterised man as 'the language animal'. Language is at the heart of human recall, of human expression, of human hope, and of human aspiration. It is largely through language that we interpret life and experience, communicate that experience to ourselves and others, and come to know, through spoken and written converse, the infinite variety in the experience of others. It is, therefore, the principal conduit of learning both in and out of school, and this is why verbal interaction between teacher and pupil and between pupil and pupil is acknowledged as the most powerful teaching strategy in the Primary School Curriculum. The importance of language in teaching and learning, as in life, is aptly summarised in the subtitle of a paper presented at the INTO Education Conference in November, whose proceedings are included in this publication: *The Power of Language*.

The significance of language in terms of cognitive, emotional and imaginative development was not a direct concern of either the discussion paper or the conference deliberations, although the liberating power of story and its stimulus to imaginative and emotional growth was addressed in one presentation. The main concern of both the discussion paper and the conference was language teaching and learning, and the principal elements of these as they affect Irish primary schools are dealt with in considerable detail. These include English and Irish both as first and second languages, modern European languages, and the most recent linguistic challenge in Irish primary

schools, teaching English or Irish as a foreign language to non-national children.

However, it is important to iterate that in looking at all of these together the conference acknowledged their interconnectedness. All of the implications of this interconnectedness were not considered or even adverted to, and it would be unreasonable to expect that they should be since this was the first time that the Education Committee addressed language as an entity in schools. Nevertheless, the mere fact of their proximity in both the discussion paper and in the conference proceedings brought issues and challenges to the fore that can provide a new context for the debate on language and language teaching and learning in the future.

## **ENGLISH**

In dealing with English the Introduction raises some pertinent issues. The section *English in the Curriculum* describes the principles and salient features of the approach to teaching English that it recommends. This is followed by an analysis of the discussions that took place in the course of the focus group research conducted by the Education Committee. The presentation given at the conference by Ted Motherway highlights some of the issues arising from the research, and all of these combined provided the basis for the delegates' deliberations.

The implementation of the English curriculum began in September 2000. Teachers have, therefore, been teaching the curriculum for three years. However, as the

preamble to the Focus Group Analysis (below) points out "the implementation of the curriculum in English is still in the transition phase, since it will be another five years before children will have experienced the curriculum throughout their years in primary school". The Focus Group Analysis and the collated rapporteurs' reports provide some information on the extent to which the curriculum is being implemented successfully, the features of it teachers find attractive or otherwise, and the issues and challenges that are of most concern to them. A number of outcomes emerged from the focus group research that warrant some comment.

### **Focus Group Analysis**

It is evident that teachers welcome the English curriculum and are, to a great extent, happy with the content and the approaches to the teaching of English that it espouses. It is clear, however, that the radical structure of the curriculum (the arrangement of the strands and strand units) has proven more of a challenge than they feel able to cope with. Teachers are using the more traditional elements of oral language, reading and writing which form the strand units rather than the strands as proposed in the

curriculum, in their planning and teaching. It is not clear at this stage whether this approach would undermine the principles that underpin the curriculum (language is indivisible, and children not only learn language but learn through language) that dictated the choice of strands as they are constituted. The possible reasons for teacher's resistance to the new structure are given in the Focus Group Analysis. Further in-service education would seem to be necessary to explore the use of strands and strand units. This finding also indicates an important issue that will need to be considered in the process of curriculum review that is being initiated currently by the NCCA.

There is, on the other hand, heartening evidence that other important features of the curriculum are being dealt with very successfully. Oral language activity has become an important feature not only of English lessons but of teaching and learning throughout the curriculum, not least in the more senior classes. Indeed, although there is increased oral language activity taking place in the English curriculum, teachers are using other subjects and curriculum areas to provide oral language opportunities rather than through discrete time during English lessons.

Children are reading more and from a greater variety of texts, and the class library, in particular, seems to have a more central place in the approaches to reading. Children are being encouraged to respond more to what they read, most notably through oral language activity, writing, and visual arts. Reactions to commercially-produced materials were mixed, although more critical than otherwise. Yet this in itself seems to be stimulating a greater eclecticism on the part of teachers in choosing reading materials. There is less evidence that the approach to developing the higher comprehension skills that is outlined in the *Teacher Guidelines for English* is being embraced, although there are indications that oral language activity has attained a more prominent role in this area as well.

There is less evidence that the approach to writing espoused by the curriculum has found favour. Children seem to be writing on a wider range of topics and in a greater variety of genres. However, it appears that some teachers see the purpose of writing, editing and redrafting as a mechanism for correcting mistakes in spelling, grammar and punctuation rather than as a process through which children can improve the expressiveness of their writing while, at the same time, develop their mastery of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Other issues of concern included the particular challenges of mediating the curriculum in large classes and multigrade classes, and the constraints of time. A particular criticism was that the curriculum is not suitable for children with language problems associated with socio-economic disadvantage.

## GAEILGE

Since the foundation of the State a feature of the curriculum at primary level has been the inclusion of two languages: Irish and English. This was a reflection of the nationalist and separatist character of the various movements that led to the creation of the State. After it was established, a central aspiration was the revival of the Irish language, and this was one of the principal goals of the first national curriculum that was promulgated in the mid-1920s and its modification in the early 1930s. By the 1970s it was acknowledged that this aim had manifestly failed, and the goal of bilingualism gained greater currency.

Since education, and the primary school in particular, was seen as the principal mechanism by which these goals could be achieved they had crucial consequences in terms of the content of the primary school curriculum, the allocation of time to different subjects, and the standards of proficiency pupils were expected to achieve in Irish. Such was the pressure of Irish on the curriculum that as late as the mid 1960s up to 43% of the school day was devoted to the teaching of Irish.

The proposition that the language might be revived or that a bilingual community might be achieved solely through the educational system was not only misguided but placed a burden on teachers and pupils. In the context of the teaching methods in use at the time and in some cases the too zealous approach of some teachers, this may have done more harm to the cause of the language than might have been the case were a less heavy-handed approach adopted. This is the burden of history.

In 2004 Irish is an integral part of the curriculum. That it should be so is argued in the Introduction, and important issues in relation to bilingualism (the acknowledged *raison d'être* of including Irish in the Primary School Curriculum) are examined in the discussion paper and in one of the key presentations given at the conference, *Language Policy and Practice in the Classroom*, by Dr Muiris Ó Laoire.

In both papers some of the central issues and challenges in relation to Irish and the teaching of Irish are addressed. Both acknowledge that the school is crucial if the goal of bilingualism is to be achieved, and in this context a number of pertinent questions are posed. For example, what is bilingualism and how do we establish what is the critical mass of language that is necessary to operate in a bilingual context? This raises the important issue of the difference between language learning and language acquisition. "Language that is learned may be forgotten, if not retrieved from short-term memory, or used or activated on a regular basis. Language that is acquired is automated or automatically available" (Ó Laoire). In terms of this distinction, language acquisition is, manifestly, necessary to interact in a bilingual community. This raises the question of where such a bilingual community is to be found outside the Gaeltacht. A bilingual context can be created in the classroom, but outside school it may only exist in disparate and unconnected groups of speakers with whom the

pupil may never come into contact.

If we accept the proposition that schools are critical in producing competent bilinguals, such bilinguals need to be able to integrate with Irish speaking clusters or networks outside school. It is palpably highly ambitious to expect schools not only to produce competent bilinguals but to motivate them sufficiently to create Irish speaking contexts for themselves outside school. This has been the principal on-going dilemma of Irish acquisition and bilingualism. While conditions can be created in the classroom in which the use of Irish can be seen as relevant and enjoyable, pupils rarely if ever experience such conditions outside school. It is in this context that Ó Laoire draws the dispiriting if not unsurprising conclusion that “schools on their own will not change language behaviour”.

That said, if bilingualism is the *raison d'être* of Irish in the curriculum and if we acknowledge that schools are “critical contexts for language revitalisation in terms of bilingualism” (Ó Laoire), the aims of the Irish curriculum and the methods used to teach it will be crucial. An *Curaclam Gaeilge* in the Primary School Curriculum represents a more radical shift in terms of content and teaching approaches than any other subject. It encapsulates a communicative approach to language acquisition and heavily emphasises the importance and use of oral language. The details of the approach are laid out in the section of the discussion paper entitled, *An Ghaeilge sa Bhunscoil*. As with English, the Education Committee conducted focus group research with teachers in order to get some indications of the success or otherwise of the implementation of the curriculum. The caveats stated in relation to the focus group research on the English curriculum apply equally to any conclusions that may be drawn with regard to Irish.

### **Focus Group Analysis – T1 Schools**

The opinion was expressed strongly that the curriculum did not cater sufficiently for children in T1 schools. It was felt that, while it had many admirable features, it lacked sufficient linguistic richness for a first language curriculum. Teachers in Gaeltacht schools were particularly critical of the curriculum, and it was recommended strongly that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment should develop clear and structured guidelines in relation to the teaching of both Irish and English in T1 schools.

Despite this criticism, it was evident from the discussions that teachers were making every effort to implement the curriculum, and that a wide range of strategies were being used. It was felt that, while a high standard of oral language was achieved by children by the time they were leaving primary school, their standards in reading and writing left something to be desired. It emerged from the discussions that, in the case of gaelscoileanna particularly, teachers felt there was a significant challenge

involved in persuading senior children to speak Irish in the school playground. This is particularly worrying in the context of Ó Laoire's comments on creating bilingual contexts for Irish speakers. Similar concern was expressed about the lack of Irish speaking contexts outside school.

Recommended emergent reading activities are being used. However, it was clear from the discussions that in some schools, despite the strong recommendation to the contrary in the curriculum, reading in Irish and English are begun at the same time, and that, in many cases, this was due to pressure from parents. The issue of when reading should begin in Irish and English in T1 schools is a vexed question, and teachers and parents require clear direction based on what research is available.

The use of 'real books' was welcomed, but the opinion was strongly expressed that those available in Irish were neither as varied nor as interesting as those in English, and in too many cases they were not sufficiently challenging for children, particularly those in senior classes. Indeed, it was strongly felt that a greater range and variety of support materials and resources were necessary if the curriculum is to be implemented successfully. In compensation, some teachers used TG4 and Radio na Gaeltachta, but it was strongly urged that special programmes for T1 schools be broadcast. It was emphasised, too, that support materials should cater for the different dialects if children were not to lose their local idioms.

In many cases teachers felt that they could not cater adequately for children with learning difficulties, and cited, in particular, the lack of standardised and diagnostic tests in the Irish language. It was also felt that a clear policy in relation to language choice was needed in the case of these children.

Praise was expressed for the support Gaeltacht schools received from language assistants, but some teachers felt that this support should be available in children's homes outside school time. In this context the importance of parental support in mediating the curriculum was emphasised. The support provided by the Primary Curriculum Support Service *cuiditheoirí* was also praised, and it was stressed that this should be available on an on-going basis. However, it was recommended that future in-service education should be directed at schools whose needs and circumstances were similar.

It was interesting to note that, from the evidence of the discussions, T1 schools seemed to have had few problems in finding suitable permanent teaching staff. However, difficulties are experienced when substitutes are required.

### **Focus Group Analysis – T2 Schools**

Since the implementation of the Irish curriculum only began in junior classes in the school year 2002–2003 and in middle and senior classes in the school year 2003–2004 the outcomes of the focus group research in T2 schools must be regarded with

even more circumspection than those emerging from the research in T1 schools.

However, initial indications in relation to the implementation of the Irish curriculum in T2 schools are both interesting and encouraging. The curriculum is proving very popular with junior class teachers. Great emphasis is laid on oral language activity and teachers are very pleased that reading and writing are not begun until second class. It was strongly felt that a certain amount of oral competence was vital before reading and writing were begun. Nevertheless, the curriculum offers serious challenges to teachers, and they are finding that they need to invest a lot of time in planning.

The same level of satisfaction with the curriculum was not found among teachers of more senior classes. It was felt that as children got older it was more difficult to interest them in Irish. A particular difficulty teachers identified was the mismatch between the aims and approaches of *Curaclam na Gaeilge* and the Irish curriculum at second level. They found that the two lacked any continuity. Particular criticism was directed at the influence of entrance examinations to second level schools. The emphasis on reading and writing in the examinations was seen to be at odds with the communicative approach espoused by the primary curriculum. If this is corroborated by more extensive and rigorous research, it defines one of the priorities for curriculum review at both primary and junior cycle levels.

One of the most obvious effects of the curriculum, if the outcomes of the research are to be relied on, is that much more oral Irish is taking place in the school, both formally and informally, than was the case hitherto. This is heartening in terms of the importance of creating realistic speech communities in schools. That said, some teachers find the communicative approach a challenge, and one factor of the challenge was identified as teachers' own levels of competence in Irish.

As with English, there were mixed views about the reading materials produced for Irish. Despite the detailed specifications for publishers produced by the NCCA when the curriculum was launched, the support materials that have been produced are of an alarmingly variable quality, particularly in so far as they support the aims and approaches of both the English curriculum and *Curaclam na Gaeilge*.

The focus group discussions indicated that teachers were making every effort to integrate the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), one of the cornerstones of the curriculum, but in this respect again the pressure of entrance examinations to second level schools was cited as a difficulty. As with T1 schools, the support of parents was seen as crucial, and this was not always forthcoming.

A leitmotiv of the discussion groups was the importance of planning and the amount of time it required, and a certain nostalgia for the 'cut and dried' structure of *Buntús Gaeilge* was evinced at times. Yet, this in itself can be seen as an encouraging sign that teachers are willing to embrace a communicative approach to teaching Irish, irrespective of the challenges it offers.

## LANGUAGE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

The relationship between success in education, language, and socio-economic disadvantage is well established. Bernstein's distinction between the restricted and elaborated codes of language use, alluded to in the *Introduction to the Discussion Paper* and dealt with more fully in one of the conference presentations (Motherway), may be at odds, in a purely linguistic sense, with Chomsky's theory of language acquisition (a theory that is implicitly accepted by the English curriculum), and yet it retains a certain validity. Bernstein's categorisation of a restricted code of language might have underestimated the richness, expressiveness and communicative power it possessed, but in terms of education it involves considerable contextual constraints. However powerful and acceptable it is in its own milieu, children who come to engage with the education system and the wider linguistic, cultural and social assumptions on which it is based, may find that the quality and range of language they possess (a reflection of different linguistic, cultural and social values) are inadequate for success in what they may feel is an alien environment.

Much of the difference in attitudes and expectations that children experience when they arrive in school can be encapsulated in the type and quality of language with which they are familiar. This often defines the linguistic difficulties of young children when they encounter formal education for the first time, and can create problems both for them and for teachers who have to mediate the curriculum to them. Anecdotally teachers will refer, however inaccurately, to these children as having a 'language deficit' or 'language deficiency'. This is understandable when they find themselves at the nexus of curriculum mediation and a cohort of children to whom the language and cultural assumptions of the curriculum are unfamiliar if not foreign. A more helpful categorisation would be to see the linguistic experience of such children as different rather than deficient. Yet, whatever term is used, linguistic, cultural and social difficulties remain.

The English curriculum was developed without reference to the language and cultural difference of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The problem was raised and debated at length during the process of curriculum revision, but a decision was taken that the priority was to develop a 'mainstream' curriculum, and that issues such as disadvantage and special educational needs would be addressed at a later stage.

The mainstream curriculum was, of course, mainstream to middle-class and lower middle-class experience, mores, expectations and aspirations. For children from disadvantaged backgrounds this amounted not just to a 'hidden curriculum' of middle- and lower-middle class language, values and expectations, but constituted a barrier to their availing of all of its benefits.

A continuing challenge to the education system is the mediation of the English

curriculum to serve the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many gifted and committed teachers, on a day-to-day basis, mediate the curriculum in such a way that provides children with a linguistically and culturally enriched educational experience. Nevertheless, it is a priority of curriculum review that the NCCA should provide guidelines that will enable all teachers in disadvantaged schools to provide children with an experience of English that is both enriching and relevant in school and useful in their future lives.

## **TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

One of the most extraordinary developments in Irish society in the past ten years has been the huge influx of non-nationals to the country, whether as visa holders, work permit holders, or refugees and asylum seekers. The discussion paper cites thirty-four different countries of origin for these immigrants, and the large majority of them do not have English (or Irish) as their first language. Among the non-nationals (asylum seekers in particular) there is a significant number of children of school-going age and younger. In order to avail of primary education, the acquisition of an appropriate level of competence in English (or in small number of cases, Irish) is a priority of these children. To answer this need, and to alleviate pressure on schools, the Department of Education and Science invited Integrate Ireland Language and Training (formerly the Refugee Language Support Unit) to provide support for schools.

In the context of the speed with which the numbers of non-national children in schools grew over a few short years, the response of IILT, in defining the linguistic competence these children need to avail of primary education, in training language support teachers, and in developing and making available support materials, has been impressive. IILT monitors the on-going effectiveness of the initiative and has created an up-to-date database. However, the INTO Education Committee felt it would be useful to canvass by questionnaire the views of language support teachers on their experience of different aspects of the initiative. The analysis of the responses to the questionnaire are included in the discussion paper and it is unnecessary to reiterate them here. However, it is worth adverting to a few of the key conclusions.

The initiative was considered successful in providing language support to a significant number of non-national children, and the professional support of IILT has contributed enormously in developing the competence and confidence of primary teachers in meeting the language needs of non-national pupils. It could be claimed, indeed, that that collaboration between IILT and practising teachers is at the core of the most successful developments in relation to language support.

It was strongly felt, however, that the limit of two years of language support

allocated to each pupil was, in many cases, insufficient, and that greater flexibility was needed. A feature of the language support service that might have been anticipated, in the light of the social, cultural and linguistic upheaval experienced by the children, not to say the traumatic circumstances that in many cases prompted their families to come to Ireland, is that language support teachers are often called on to give not only language support but social and psychological support as well. The details of the professional arrangements of teachers who decide to involve themselves in language support are also a source of unease.

The extent to which the services of language support teachers are going to be required in the future needs to be quantified as a matter of priority. Databases of relevant Government Departments, NGOs, IILT, and any other service that can provide accurate information on the numbers of children requiring language support in primary schools, as well as projected immigration figures arising from government policy, need to be collated and analysed if IILT, teachers and schools are to provide non-national children with the linguistic and other supports they will need to avail successfully of the learning benefits of the Primary School Curriculum.

It is worth noting, too, that even after these children are deemed, in the context of the present approach, to have achieved sufficient competence in English to access the curriculum, they will continue to need further and perhaps different on-going support. The linguistic and learning needs of non-national children adds yet another dimension to the multi-faceted nature of language teaching and learning in Irish schools, that points, as do other language needs and aspirations, to the necessity of developing a coherent, strategic approach to the whole area of language teaching and learning.

## **MODERN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

It could be seen as inevitable that, with the growing coherence of the European Community and Ireland's developing relationship with it, the question of introducing a modern European language or modern European languages to the Primary School Curriculum would eventually demand serious consideration. The *Report of the Primary Curriculum Review Body* (May, 1990), which provided the terms of reference for the revision of the curriculum that took place during the 1990s, recommended that language teaching should be confined to Irish and English, and that a modern European language should not be included. No consideration was given, therefore, to modern languages during the process of revision. Shortly before the curriculum was published it was decided that a pilot project on Modern Languages in Primary Schools would be initiated. To take account of this, the *Introduction* to the curriculum makes a

number of references to the possibility of a modern language being included at a future date. The pilot project was evaluated by Institiúid Teangeolaíochta na hÉireann, and the NCCA is currently preparing a paper on the feasibility of introducing modern languages to the Primary School Curriculum.

The evaluation was, in general, positive about the educational outcomes of the pilot project, and this is considered in the *Discussion Paper*. However, if modern languages were to be introduced to the curriculum, many other issues would need to be taken into account.

These are addressed in the *Discussion Paper* and were considered in the discussions of the delegates at the conference. They include:

- 1 the educational dividend to be had from the earlier introduction of modern languages;
- 1 the issue of expanding a curriculum that is seen to be full already;
- 1 the question of time allocation in the curriculum;
- 1 the issues associated with establishing continuity in language teaching from first to second level education;
- 1 the competence of primary teachers to teach modern languages;
- 1 the implications for pre-service and in-service education;
- 1 the implications of the inclusion of modern languages in relation to the concept of the Primary School Curriculum as an integrated learning construct;
- 1 the justifiable expectation on the part of teachers of additional financial reward for teaching a new subject;
- 1 the choice of learning model: language competence, language awareness, or cultural awareness.

These need not be rehearsed again here. However, if a decision is to be taken to include a European language dimension in the Primary School Curriculum, whatever the model that might be chosen, one crucial factor should inform the decision. It should not be taken for this or that educational, cultural, social or economic reason, but as the logical outcome of a coherent strategy for language teaching and learning in both primary and post-primary schools. Indeed, it could be argued that, until such a strategy is developed, no decision should be taken on the issue.

## A COHERENT LANGUAGE STRATEGY FOR SCHOOLS

Language teaching and learning in Irish primary and post-primary schools has traditionally been approached, and indeed still is, from the point of view of teaching this or that language discretely – Irish and English in primary schools, and Irish and English and a plethora of foreign languages in post-primary schools (the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools 2002/3* includes eleven at Senior Cycle level). The decision to introduce a language or to adopt particular pedagogic approaches to teaching it is taken, by and large, without reference to other subjects and, in particular language subjects, and often in response to pressure from some group or some currently popular idea or attitude, rather than arising from a wider consideration of language and language teaching as an entity.

This has resulted in a piecemeal approach to curriculum development in the area of language. The symptoms of such an approach can be discerned in many features and developments in the area of language at first and second levels over a number of years. In the Primary School Curriculum there is an *Introduction to the Irish Curriculum and an Introduction to the English Curriculum*: there is no Introduction to Language. The pilot project in Modern Languages was initiated just as the curriculum was about to be launched, despite the fact that it had been developed as an integrated learning construct that contained no modern languages. At second level, languages are introduced on an ad hoc basis, and this in the context of the practical demise of Latin and Greek as realistic curriculum or examination options. There is little if any coordination in language policy between primary and post-primary education. During the process of developing the Irish and English curricula at primary level in the 1990s there was no second level representation on the curriculum committees; similarly, there was no first level representation on the syllabus committees that developed the Junior Cycle syllabi for Irish and English. The communicative approach adopted by *Curaclam na Gaeilge* does not appear to be replicated at Junior Cycle level where the approach to the teaching of Irish is inhibited by the pressures of the Junior Certificate Examination. The on-going and increasingly obvious failure of the teaching of Irish in schools to produce acceptable levels of oral competence, despite the amount of time devoted to it, is accepted uncritically and fails to excite either official concern or popular outrage. The approach to the teaching of Irish and the manner in which it is examined in the Leaving Certificate Examination also raises questions about levels of oral competence acquired. The issues of disadvantage in relation to language learning and educational success still await to be addressed systematically, and the language needs of non-national children, while being addressed with some degree of success so far, have added yet another dimension of complexity to language teaching and learning at both primary and post-primary level of education

Many more examples could be cited, all of which would point to the absence of any coherent policy in relation to language teaching and learning in Irish education. Is it not risible that, in the context of a failure to evolve an even moderately successful approach to bilingualism, we are considering introducing the learning of modern European languages in primary school, and are continuing to extend the language options at Second level. This in itself, if nothing else were taken into consideration, defines the need for a coherent strategic approach to language teaching and learning in first and second level education in Ireland. Until such an approach is developed we will continue to repeat the mistakes of the past and perpetuate an inchoate approach to language that will do little service to future pupils in Irish schools.



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