

1. Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish in the Primary School

Nóirín Ní Nuadháin¹

It is surprising to find that 'Reading in Irish should be of a wide and varied type' was encouraged as far back as 1922. In 1926 it was hoped that the 'practice of silent reading in school would lead the children to acquire a habit of home reading', and that 'Articles from newspapers are recommended'. As long ago as 1948 teachers were warned that 'the traditional practice of compelling the whole class to listen while each child in turn reads a portion of a lesson has little to recommend it.' So what happened? Is a revised curriculum (1999) going to make any difference? Is there anything we can do to help the children derive more benefit from reading in Irish in the primary school? After all, previous programmes had much to recommend them. In 1971 a child-centred approach with extension readers was adopted. Nowadays a fresh approach, that is more in tune with how reading is approached in second language reading, is taken. It is hoped that reading skills, when integrated with the other language skills, will be developed using a variety of texts. This paper summarises past methodologies, and will discuss the reading strategies and approaches recommended in the curriculum for use with the new textbooks and real books.

Introduction

This paper sets out to examine previous educational policies regarding the teaching of Irish language reading and the methodologies and approaches to it. Questions will be asked about some of these policies and approaches. The programmes of 1922, 1926, 1934 and 1948 all presented an integrated spoken and reading curriculum. Oral work was closely based on the matter read in the reading lesson. The 1971 curriculum, and the latest curriculum of 1999 have different approaches to oral and reading skills' development.

¹ Address for correspondence: Teagasc na Gaeilge, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9. Email: noirin.ninuadhain@spd.dcu.ie

2 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

In 1971 the oral language was primary and the reading schemes were based on the language and vocabulary encountered in the oral lessons of the preceding six months. In 1999 the themes and vocabulary of the reading material may be closely based on the oral lessons. The emphasis today is on reading for meaning, and on reading for enjoyment the plethora of colourful new books being produced. The words are not counted, and the illustrations or the context or both will help with comprehension. A task-based approach will keep the young readers engaged and interested, using a variety of skills and strategies.

The state of the art

How many of us read *Foinse*, the weekly Irish language newspaper, every Sunday? How many of us have read of Gabriel Rosenstock's (2003) holiday with a difference in his book *Ólann mo Mhiúil as an nGaingéis?* How many of us have read Cathal Ó Searcaigh's (2004) wonderful tales from his travels in Nepal, *Seal i Neipeal?* How many Irish people are aware of the feminist, or indeed postfeminist nature, of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, 'supplying something, through the natural resources of the Irish language that hadn't been there before in poetry?' (Nic Dhiarmada, 2005:182)

These books in the Irish language are for adults, and we learned to read in Irish at primary school, presumably so that we might continue to read into adulthood. So what happened? Why do many adults, teachers among them, rarely read in Irish? A survey of primary teachers (INTO 1985:5) found that only 9% said that they often read a book in Irish, 35% sometimes, and worryingly 55% said never. Newspapers and articles in Irish fared a little better with 19% reading them often, and 62% sometimes and 19% never. However, it was also reported recently (RTÉ, 2005) that one fifth of the population, and certain celebrities, do not read any books in English either. If this is as reported, it should come as no surprise to us that pupils do not read easily in Irish and that the task of reading in a second language is very daunting.

Why learn to read in Irish?

The teaching of reading in Irish in the primary school has been incorporated into official programmes since 1922, and we are still ‘reluctant readers of Irish’ (Hickey, 2005). Why expend all that time and energy on the learning of a skill that we hardly ever use? Even adults living in the Gaeltacht report disappointing levels of ability in reading in Irish, and associate reading in Irish with school, or only with the lyrics of songs or local poetry (Ó hIfearnáin, 2003, pp. 166, 170).

In order not to waste everybody’s time, teachers’ and children’s alike, we should continue to explore ways in which we can enliven the teaching of reading in Irish, so that the children we teach may come to read less reluctantly and with more pleasure. Are there ways in which we can listen to children’s likes and dislikes, so that we can involve them, provide material of interest to them, and thus entice them to read? We as teachers, and as teacher educators, must ask ourselves some hard questions if we are to rethink our methods and approaches to the teaching of reading in the Irish language, and if we are not to continue to teach in the way we were taught. Is a revised curriculum going to make any difference? After all, previous programmes had much to recommend them and were very progressive in their intent.

A review of the teaching of reading in Irish

1922 and all that

The National Programme (1922) was very ambitious, starting with Senior Infants reading (in Irish) ‘sentences on the blackboard’ (ibid, p. 16), third standard reading ‘an elementary reader’ and standard five reading ‘a suitable reader’, and ‘a suitable story reader should supplement the ordinary reader’. (ibid p.7) Standard six was to:

...read with intelligence and appreciation suitable matter in a newspaper or magazine and to memorise and understand eighty lines of suitable poetry. At least two standard works should be read.

The National Programme, 1922:7

4 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

In 1922 this was a very wide-ranging programme with the inclusion of supplementary readers, the reading of newspapers and magazines. However, the reality was that there were few suitable books in Irish, and no newspapers or magazines in Irish suitable for children. Other problems were the cost for the pupils, the difference of the Gaelic script, and the price of producing books in that script in the Ireland of the 1920's. Kelly (2002) noted that:

...failure to address the adequate provision of reading material in Irish very much hampered the official revival policy.

Kelly, 2002:102

The content of the books that did exist was aimed at teaching the language. The teaching of reading in this period was, as the programme stated, 'as a basis for conversation' (National Programme 1922:7). The Programme was written in English because only 'a small proportion of teachers are fully competent to carry out the Programme in its entirety' (ibid p. 30).

It was hardly fair to expect children to carry the burden of the revival of Irish. Previous generations of children had been punished physically for speaking Irish (Máirtín, 2003:208-9). From 1922 they were expected to reverse the state of the Irish language with the help of their teachers, who, in their turn, were in fear of losing their jobs during a transition period, though... 'many teachers are uneasy ... no undue hardship ... or injustice ... (will be) inflicted on any teacher'(National Programme 1922 pp. 30-31).

1925-26 Second Programme

The Second Report and Programme presented to the Minister for Education in 1926 reappraised and amended the 1922 programme, but it was hoped that, by degrees, all the work of the school would be in Irish (Report and Programme, 1926:12). The Infant programme was to be taught through Irish between 10.30 a.m. and 2 p.m. only. Books were to be provided for poor children, 'somehow' (ibid p. 16) and 'in all standards fresh reading matter will be expected each year' (ibid p. 29). Publishers were to be 'placed under closer restriction ensuring books may promote the educational aim of the nation' (p. 16).

A national tone should be sought, and special account should be ... taken of the nature of life in the locality ... urban or rural character, occupations, and its products, its proximity to sea, mountain *etc.*

Report and Programme, 1926:16, 29

Existing books were thought to be expensive and unsuitable, and the situation was still the same in 1941 (INTO, 1941) The revised programme had much to recommend it, but there were too many problems to solve before a programme of its kind could be undertaken. We can learn from this that it takes more than an ambitious programme to ensure that children will read in Irish.

1933 Nótaí d'Oidí: Gaeilge / Notes for Teacher: Irish

These notes (Roinn Oideachais, 1933) provide an interesting insight into the methodologies of the period.

The end for which reading is taught is often forgotten ... That end is first to enable our pupils to master the contents of written and printed matter, and secondly to develop in them a taste for reading as a means of wisely using their leisure time and of education themselves in after-school life.

Roinn Oideachais 1933:44

The notes were written in English with exemplars in Irish. They offered an explanation of the 'Direct Method' in the teaching of reading. From this we can see the genesis of the rigid teaching method that may be the root of many of the problems we have today with reading in Irish in the primary classroom. Many teachers were taught using this method and they may continue to use it without questioning it.

The use of the text as a medium of language teaching is our special concern here, and the varied processes to which the reading-lesson is subjected include oral reading, explanation through the new language, detailed questioning on the matter, free reproduction, grammatical exercises, generalisation or particular application and free composition.

Roinn Oideachais 1933:45

6 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

1934 Revised Programme for Primary Instruction

The Revised Programme (Roinn Oideachais, 1934) clawed back the concession given to the infants in 1926, and now their whole day was to be taught through the medium of Irish. Dissatisfaction with this situation was shown in the results of the survey (INTO, 1941) into the teachers' attitudes to the use of Irish as a medium of instruction. The new Infant programme (Roinn Oideachais, 1948) continued the use of Irish as a medium and aimed at 'making the children fairly fluent Irish speakers by the time they are eight years of age' (ibid p. 4).

The New Curriculum 1971

There had been no change in Departmental policy with regard to the importance of Irish, or in the approach to the teaching of reading in the curriculum, between 1926 and the new curriculum in 1971 (Rialtas na hÉireann, 1971). Gaeilge/Irish was dealt with in the first book of two curriculum guidelines and was divided into Irish in the Gaeltacht and in the Galltacht. The National Assessment of English Reading report (NAER, 2004: 2) and Moloney (1998: 92) acknowledge the strides made in English reading as a result of this curriculum. Irish reading was also accorded some importance. It was taught for 30 minutes per day with a specific reader for every class (sometimes two) and these were based on the oral lessons of the preceding six months. It was taken for granted that third class would have mastered the basic mechanics of reading. The senior classes would be proficient in reading aloud so they should concentrate on silent reading. (ibid pp. 65-66) Reading different text types was also mentioned as well as functional reading '*eolas a lorg agus a thiomsú*/to search for information and to gather it' (ibid p. 66). There were supplementary readers and a variety of books in the class library. Reading was acknowledged as a pastime.

Léitheoireacht mar chaitheamh aimsire; scéalta, dréachta ... aistí, diolama filíochta ... agus an múinteoir eolach ar scoth na litríochta/stories, passages from stories, ... essays, collections of poetry, ... and the teachers themselves are aware of good literature.

Rialtas na hÉireann, 1971:67

The teachers were advised to discuss the topic beforehand with the children, and to get them to scan the text for answers to pre-reading questions. This methodology for the reading lesson was in line with best practice.

Lack of variety of text types

An examination of the textbooks of this period shows that they were fairly dull, with long pieces of discursive text, sometimes illustrated, but always laid out in the same manner: a long piece of text with no sub-headings and followed by questions. Though the teachers' notes clearly advocated silent reading, the practice of reading aloud by all the children still continued. This practice invariably led to only one reading skill of one type of text being developed, i.e. intensive reading aloud of a long piece of text. There were some poems and the words of a song now and again, but in general there was little variety.

1999 Curaclam na Bunscoile: Teanga/Gaeilge 1999 Primary School Curriculum: Language/Irish

Hickey (2001a and 2001b) gives a comprehensive overview of the approach to reading in Irish in the 1999 curriculum. The Irish language curriculum is divided into four strands; *Listening, Speaking, Reading* and *Writing*. The curriculum books *An Curaclam* and *Na Treoirí do Mhúinteoirí: Gaeilge* (Rialtas na hÉireann, 1999a and b) are written in Irish. The curriculum was well received by teachers, who are fully conversant with its demands and with the new approaches and methodologies described (Rialtas na hÉireann 1999b, Cuid 5) There has been extensive in-service training and there is a support system in place, which is run by the Primary Curriculum Support Group at www.pfsp.ie.

The main differences in the Revised Curriculum can be summarised as follows:

- usually no formal reading before second class
- no graded reading schemes

8 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

- no specific time for Irish reading. Reading is done when necessary during an integrated lesson on a particular topic
- an early literacy programme is followed in the Gaeltacht and in Scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge (SLG/All-Irish Schools)
- real books have been supplied with the class textbook

The curriculum committee thought the following points to be of sufficient importance to highlight them as *An bhéim nua* 'the new emphasis.' Children should be enabled to:

- search primarily for meaning in a text
- guess, predict or surmise
- disregard redundancies in a text and not expect to understand every word
- enhance self-confidence and develop cognitively through reading in Irish
- be exposed to a variety of books and as wide a variety of text types as possible
- use a variety of reading skills and subskills
- integrate reading with the other language skills (listening, speaking and writing)
- read silently
- read aloud in groups, but not be obliged to read aloud to the whole class

Rialtas na hÉireann, 1999:131

However, we have seen from previous programmes that much of the spirit of the 1999 curriculum was already present in the earlier curricula. Something must be added therefore, in order that the present curriculum be successful.

Integration of skills

The new textbooks (*Bualadh Bos, Maith Thú!, Séideán Sí, Treo Nua*) integrate the four language skills and the children use a variety of reading skills and subskills. The emphasis in the classroom is not on examining reading and comprehension of longer texts, but on teaching the children how to read them by:

1. Skimming a text for gist (*Look at the pictures. What's the story about?*)
2. Scanning a text for information (*Scan the first paragraph. Tell me what age Liam is.*)
3. Reading a text intensively for meaning (*Read the third paragraph. Find all the words for clothes and colour.*)
4. Reading a text extensively for pleasure (*Read 'An Puimcín is Mó' at home tonight. Do not worry if you do not understand every word.*)

The pre-reading questions above are posed in Irish during the Irish lesson.

Text types from the 1999 Curriculum

NAER (2004: xv-xvii, 4, 6) recommended that children should be exposed to a wide variety of text types. The Irish language textbooks have included texts that ensure the required integration of the four language skills. They include stories, poems, rhymes and songs with recordings on CD, and the child's book has exercises that include reading, listening, speaking and writing. There are cue-cards for role-playing (*Bualadh Bos* 5, pp.185-196) and short dramas, (ibid pp.196-199) and there are comic strips, cartoons puzzles, crosswords and wordsearches (*Maith Thú!* 2-6). Replica greeting cards and invitations are included and the children could transfer these easily to authentic cards (*Maith Thú!* 5 and 6, *Bualadh Bos*). There are authentic recipes for an energetic teacher to follow (*Oideas do Phancóga* in *Treo Nua* 4, p.79) and instructions for constructing a toy, for example *Eitleán páipéir*/a paper aeroplane, in *Maith Thú!* 6 (p.6).

A task-based approach

The four language skills are no longer divided into passive (listening and reading) and active (speaking and writing) skills. Reading is considered to be as active as possible with the reader engaging with the text and making suitable responses. The children are always asked to read with a purpose, and almost always use another language skill to complete a task. For example, the children are asked to read short texts and to make various responses such as the following:

- Read a text to do/make/construct/colour/draw/cook.
- Listen to a story on CD. Follow the text and enjoy the story.
- Read and answer pre-reading questions posed orally by the teacher.

10 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

- Read a script and take part (orally) in role-playing and drama.
- Read the instructions and play a board game (Bingo, Snakes and Ladders with added written instructions).
- Read and interpret timetables; TV listings/class, bus and train timetables.
- Read a card and do a mime. (*You are putting on eye makeup. You are trying to walk on hot sand.*) The rest of the class guess the mime written on the card.
- Read and write greeting cards/invitations/notes/emails/texts.
- Texts include *grma* (Go raibh maith agat!) *sln l@* (Slán leat!)

Early literacy

The Publisher's guidelines (distributed prior to the publication of the curriculum in 1999) advised that children in Infants' classes in L2 schools should be provided with 'text-less books, since reading will not be formally taught in these classes.' They (the textbooks) should be large, bright and colourful as would any small child's book. It was recommended that they would have lots of pictures, to cover the themes of the curriculum, of

...children, family, toys, children's pets, clothes, weather, festivals, activities with number and colour, and a few stories of events in the child's life to teach sequencing and continuity.

Treoirínte do na Foilsitheoirí, 1999: 21

It was considered a big leap to have a text-less 'reading' book in Irish for the junior classes. It could have been misinterpreted and taken to mean that the junior classes did not require any book. Fortunately, beautifully coloured books with picture puzzles and picture stories were provided. The *Séideán Sí* series textbooks, produced for Gaeltacht and *Scoileanna lan-Ghaeilge* (all-Irish schools), have some print because the children in these schools generally start formal reading in Irish before English (Ní Bhaoill and Ó Duibhir, 2004: 4).

Big Books

Most of the main publishers have provided Big Books and these are discussed below:

Séideán Sí (An Gúm) has five Big Books for Junior Infants, six for Senior Infants and three for First Class. The story is recorded on three CDs catering for the dialectal variations.

Maith Thú! series (The Educational Company) for Junior Infants through to Second Class, each have two Big Books, with no print in the Infants' books, and introducing print in the other two standards. Each book has the full text of each story in the eight big books on its back cover, for the teacher to pre-read and simplify if necessary. The six-page stories increase to eight pages in the last story for second class. The books are 'readable' by the whole class, while the teacher tells the story.

Treo Nua series (Folens) has six Big Books; three for first, and three for second class. Exercises in the child's book enable the children to read and listen, and are used in conjunction with the story on CD.

The Resources centre/*Áisaonad* in Belfast, has also produced Big Books: *Béir, Béir, Béir* which incorporates the ordinal numbers in the story, *Stad! Agus scéalta eile* includes the rules of the road, and other safety guidelines in the story. *An dTig Leat Seo a Dhéanamh?* is easily followed, giving simple instructions to make animals and toys out of egg boxes. The children could read the instructions and make the toys, satisfying the plea made to vary the text types read by the children to include functional reading. (Moloney, 1998, 95 and NAER, 2004, 153-165).

These Big Books introduce some of the early literacy skills necessary for the children to become independent readers later on: left-to-right orientation, reading top-to-bottom, reading and interpreting a picture, predicting the story from the pictures, decoding print. The curriculum (Rialtas na hÉireann 1999a:5-6, and 1999b:125-128) stresses the necessity of having had lots of aural and oral practice before beginning to read, as did the reports quoted in Moloney (1998: 94) in relation to reading in English before embarking on the then reading scheme.

Listening to the story in the Big Book

At present the teacher can *read* (i.e. tell the story) the Big Books in Irish with the children and s/he can also play the CD of the story, where one

12 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

exists. Hickey (1991, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) and Hickey and Ó Cainín (2003) prove that if children hear the story and follow it in the book, their L2 comprehension and reading improves dramatically. Children as young as Third Class read Irish books supported by a recording more often than if they had no recording, they focussed on reading for meaning, and their motivation and reading rate and accuracy improved. These results with taped books should encourage any publisher to produce stories on CD. *Fios Feasa* has begun to issue CD-Roms, and O'Brien Press has some recordings of real books. The teachers will use recordings of the stories to encourage children at school, and parents will be enabled to tackle an Irish book at home.

The stories may be used for learning vocabulary, for connecting with the children's own experiences, for generating conversation, and for eliciting responses. The teachers accept any kind of response from the children; in English, responses with sounds, mime and gestures, or in a mixture of English and Irish (Mhic Mhathúna, 1996, 1999 and 2001).

Listening to the teacher

Children could be introduced to some international stories, orally and pictorially through the methodology devised by Ní Nuadháin (2004). The stories are told using the three phases of a listening lesson. The children then retell the story while sequencing the six A4 pictures that come with each story. They will progress easily to read the versions of those stories as told in the Big Books, or the new versions of the stories from Ní Ailpín (1999, 2000). The children could read the real books independently, as a follow up to having (re)told the story, sequenced the pictures, and/or by having read the Big Books together.

Real books

The National Assessment of English Reading (2004) had noted the need to move from a reliance on reading schemes to real books

The overuse of published reading schemes and workbooks by many teachers should be replaced by the use of more authentic reading texts

in a range of genres and by enhanced opportunities to engage in sustained response to reading.

NAER 2004:158

Séideán Sí (An Gúm) has twenty one small Real Books for little hands in Junior Infants to hold. Senior Infants have thirty two. First Class has forty five. The stories in the textbooks are on the CD. There is a clear connection between the oral and the written language. An Gúm also provides books on various topics in history, geography science, mathematics, music and a wide-range of dictionaries.

Maith Thú! (The Educational Company) has ten real books for each of Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth classes.

Carroll-Heinemann has published one set of six: *Léimis le Chéile* with very good guidelines.

Sos is not related to any scheme. It is a delightful series of real books from the O'Brien Press. Two stories come with a recording, and the O'Brien Press website provides interactive worksheets on the whole series.

An tÁisaonad has a graded series of 100 books called *Céim ar Chéim* with useful worksheets and extension exercises on an excellent website.

Cló Mhaigh Eo has published prize-winning, well-illustrated, interesting storybooks.

Cló Iar-Chonnachta provides rhymes and songbooks with high quality CDs.

Children can follow the texts of the stories and rhymes and listen to the CD in the packages (*Scéilín Ó Bhéilín* and *Rabhlaí Rabhlaí*) produced by the Curriculum Development Unit in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick/*Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, Co Chiarraí*.

Criteria for selection of real books

Some examples are offered here of a selection of real books in the teaching of Irish reading at different levels, with two more specific examples and teaching suggestions following:

- simple, familiar tales with CD if possible
- text simple but content worth reading, for example *Drochlá Ruairí* and Ruairí series (*Cló Mhaigh Eo*)
- large print with black and white illustrations as in *Fiacla Mhamó/Granny's Teeth* (O'Brien Press)
- more advanced text with recording of story as in *Sinéad ag Damhsa* (O'Brien Press)
- books by recognised authors like Gabriel Rosenstock and Áine Ní Ghlinn: *Céard atá sa Bhosca? Glantachán Earraigh* (Ní Ghlinn, *An Gúm*, 2002); *Scuabtha Chun Siúil, Ordóigín* (Rosenstock, *An Gúm*, 2002, 2001)
- books with a variety of text types in the series *Céim ar Chéim (An tÁisaonad)*: *Dónal Dobhareach* (cumulative story); *An dTig leat Seo a Dhéanamh?* (includes recipes and making toys); *Cé Leis an Ubh Seo?* (repetition of high-frequency language); *Dhá Éan Bheaga* (rhymes); and *Na Beacha agus An Béar* a great little play using sounds and actions.

Appendix A includes more information on books, support materials and publishers.

The use of real books in the classroom: Two examples

An Dochtúir Dan

An Dochtúir Dan, *Rirá* series (O'Brien Press) is a very witty but simple book, suitable for Senior Infants as a first language, or Second and Third Classes in L2 schools. The story is about a visit to a very dangerous doctor *Dan*, or *Dainséarach* if you believe the graffiti on the surgery notice board! The doctor asks a series of questions *An bhfuil an phian i do bholg?* 'Is the pain in your tummy?' *An bhfuil an phian i do shúil?* 'Is the pain in your

eye?’ and so on for each part of the body. Each page has only one question and one answer and the illustration is very clear.

Pre-reading phase

1. Teach/revise vocabulary: *i do cheann, i do bholg, i do scornach, i do chluas, i do lámh, i do chos, i do shúil*, using a language game like *Deir Ó Grádaigh* ‘Simple Simon Says’ and sing some of the activity songs from *Amhráin do Pháistí; Sínn do lámha, Buail bos, Buail do bhosa srl*. Revise *Lámh, lámh eile*.
2. Teach/revise question and negative answer: *An bhfuil an phian...? Nil...*
3. Do a short drama using the lines from each page in the correct sequence (see above) while pointing clearly to the relevant part of the body. Teacher can act as doctor until the lines are learned, thus the pupils only have to remember *Nil an phian i mo ...*. It makes for a funny short drama, and a doctor’s outfit from a toyshop would add to the fun. If the drama is enacted word for word as in the text of the book, and if it is done often enough, the book can be read subsequently with the teacher, and independently by the child later on.

Céard atá sa Bhosca?

Céard atá sa Bhosca? (*An Gúm*) is difficult to grade for reading age. The story is about an empty box that Seán takes to school. The children spend the day guessing all the possible things that could be in the box. Watch out for the Conditional Mood but do not let it put you off!

Before reading it in class the teacher should follow the three phases outlined above for *An Dochtúir Dan*. In the pre-reading phase the teacher isolates all the vocabulary needed to guess ‘what’s in the box’/*Céard atá sa bhosca?*

1. A guessing game with a real empty box is the most obvious place to start. Use familiar vocabulary to start, and add the new language later. *Céard/Cad atá sa bhosca? An bhfuil? Tá/Nil*. This is not as easy as it looks for an L2 child, and lots of practice is needed. Keep it simple. Suggest *leabhar* ‘book’, *frog, eilifint, leoraí, madra* ‘dog’.

16 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

2. The vocabulary needed for reading is *damhán alla* 'spider', *frog*, *feithidí* 'insects', *rud gránna* 'something horrible', *madra* 'dog', *rothar* 'bike', *coinín* 'rabbit', *eilifint*, *leoraí*, *gloiní* 'glasses', *piscín* 'kitten', *bréagán* 'toy', *clocha* 'stones', *leabhar* 'book', *liathróid* 'ball', *gunna*, *éadaí* 'clothes'. Weave these into the guessing game by degrees, using actual objects or the pictures from the book if the class can see them. Add *Ní féidir liom a rá go fóill* 'I cannot say yet'. *Faoi rún* 'secret'. *Gach duine fiosrach* 'everybody curious', by degrees using flashcards or the blackboard for these phrases.

Reading phase

Firstly, get an overview of the book, look at the pictures together and talk about what might be in the box. It is not a good idea to start reading at page one, and not look at the last pages until later. The teacher asks pre-reading questions. The children never read without a purpose or a reason to read. *Oscail leathanach a sé. Cén t-ainm atá ar an gcailin? (Sile) Cad atá ar leathanach a naoi? (frog) srl ...* Write 6 and 9 on the blackboard for *a sé* and *a naoi*. Most of the reading in class would be done by answering questions, simple at the beginning and getting more difficult. Silent reading, skimming for gist, and scanning for information, and reading aloud of short answers could be combined, thus teaching the children valuable reading skills instead of simply examining mechanical reading skills. Other suggestions are given in the Guidelines (Rialtas na hÉireann, 1999b: 131-138) and Hadfield (2001) also offers simple reading exercises.

Who needs to read aloud in Irish?

It is worth reiterating that the practice of having children read aloud round-robin while the others listen (or fidget) should not be made a central feature of the teaching of Irish reading, as was recognised as long ago as 1908 (see Moloney, 1998: 85). Only a minority of the population needs to read aloud in Irish, for example, teachers, university professors, actors reading for a part in a play or a TV soap, priests/ministers or members of the congregation in the Gaeltacht at Irish language masses/services and Leaving Certificate students preparing for their oral examination at the age of seventeen. Small children do not need to spend all the time that is spent in the primary school preparing for a career they may never have, or for an

exam they will do in the future. Since 1999 there is no longer any specific time allotted for reading in Irish in the primary school. The time there is would be more profitably spent in developing silent reading skills with the emphasis on reading for meaning, texts of suitable length and interest to small children.

Conclusions

We have come a long way only to find ourselves still grappling with the problem of how to encourage children to read in Irish. However, the real difference now is the availability of materials to support teachers in this task. The new textbooks, including all the reading materials and text types that the previous programmes called for, are now available, and there is a wealth of real books suitable for reading in the primary school. Anecdotal evidence from teachers attests to the fact that they are happy with the new materials, particularly the teachers in the Gaeltacht and the all-Irish schools with *Séideán Sí*. If the teachers could enlist the cooperation of parents and of the libraries they would make even better progress. Libraries could stock the real books and maybe extend an invitation to an Irish storyteller during Book Week. Parents could be encouraged to buy the recordings of the stories and listen to them during car journeys and buy or borrow the books and read them with the children. Harris and Murtagh acknowledge the positive effects that parental interest and cooperation have on children's progress in Irish (1999: 164-171).

The approach proposed in the Revised Curriculum is that speaking and listening are developed before reading and writing. The reading texts are well prepared with listening and speaking exercises so that the child is familiar with the language of the text before reading it. Instead of spending valuable time reading aloud, other reading skills will be developed. Instead of examining mechanical reading, the child will be taught how to read. The aim is that the teacher will ensure that the child is engaged with the text, is interacting with it and bringing his/her own consciousness and previous experience to it. Reading in Irish in the primary school should now prove to be a more enjoyable and rewarding experience for children. Shorter, more

18 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

varied texts and an eclectic approach to the teaching of Irish reading should help to ensure this.

References

- Hadfield, J. and Hadfield, C. (2001) *Simple Reading Activities, Oxford Basics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, J. and Murtagh, L. (1999) *Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School, A Review of Research and Development*. Dublin: ITÉ.
- Hickey, T. (1991) Leisure reading in a second language: An experiment with audio-tapes in Irish. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 4 (2), 119-131.
- Hickey, T. (2001a) Reading in a second language: Teaching Irish reading, *Oideas* 49, 66-84.
- Hickey, T. (2001b) Múineadh léitheoireacht na Gaeilge agus an Curaclam Athbheithnithe, *Teangeolas* 40, 55-65.
- Hickey, T. (2003) Second language reading: Taping over the cracks, in G. Shiel, and U. Ní Dhálaigh, (eds.) *Other Ways of Seeing; Diversity in Language and Literacy* (pp.147-154). Dublin: RAI (Reading Association of Ireland).
- Hickey, T. (2005) Second language writing systems: Reluctant readers of a minority language. In V. Cook (ed.) *Second Language Writing Systems* (pp. 398-423). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Hickey, T. and Ó Cainín, P. (2003) Léitheoirí óga na Gaeilge: Cothú agus cabhair in R. Uí Mhianáin, (ed.) *Idir Luibíní* (pp.23-44). Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life.
- INTO (1941) *Report of Committee of Inquiry into the Use of Irish as a Teaching Medium to Children whose Home Language is English*. Dublin: INTO.
- INTO (1985) *The Irish Language in Primary Education*, Summary of INTO survey of teachers' attitudes to the position of Irish in primary education. Dublin: INTO.
- Kelly, A. (2002) *Compulsory Irish, Language and Education in Ireland 1870's – 1970's* (pp.88-92). Dublin: Academic Press.
- Máirtín, C. (2003) *An Máistir, An Scoil agus an Scolaíocht i Litríocht na Gaeilge*, Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life.
- Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1996) Is lomsa é leon, *Oideas*, Earrach/Spring, 113-125.

- Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1999) Early steps in bilingualism. *Early Years, a Journal of International Research and Development*, 19, (2), 38-50.
- Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2001) Bilingual narrative: Young children's responses to stories in Irish, in G. Shiel, and U. Ní Dhálaigh, (eds.) *Other Ways of Seeing, Diversity in Language and Literacy, Volume Two* (pp. 141-146). Dublin: RAI.
- Moloney, N. (1998) Perspectives on the development of reading in Irish primary schools, in G. Shiel, and U. Ní Dhálaigh, (eds.) *Developing Language and Literacy: The Role of the Teacher* (pp.79-98). Dublin: RAI.
- NAER, (2004) *National Assessment of English Reading, (Conclusions and Recommendations, pp.153-165)* Dublin: Educational Research Centre. Online document at: www.education.ie [Accessed 10 February 2006].
- National Programme (1922) *National Programme of Primary Instruction*. Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland.
- Nic Dhiarmada, B. (2005) *Téacs Baineann Téacs Mná, Gnéithe de Fhilíocht Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*. Baile Átha Cliath: Clochomhar Teo.
- Ní Ailpín, T. (1999, 2000) *Cochaillin Dearg, An Chircín Rua, An Tornapa Mór Millteach, Na Trí Mhuicín, Cinnín Óir agus na Trí Bhéar*. Baile Átha Cliath: Foras na Gaeilge/An Gúm.
- Ní Bhaoill, M. and Ó Duibhir, P. (2004) *Emergent Literacy in Gaeltacht and All-Irish Schools*. Dublin: An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta. Online document at: www.cogg.ie [Accessed 10 February 2006].
- Ní Nuadháin, N. (2004) *Tomás na hOrdóige agus Scéalta Eile*, Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- Ó hÍfearnáin, T. (2003) Cumas agus cleachtas na litearthachta i measc daoine fásta sa Ghaeltacht in R. Uí Mhianáin, (ed.) *Idir Lúibíní* (pp.156-172). Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life.
- Ó Searcaigh, C. (2004) *Seal i Neipeal*. Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- Report and Programme (1925-26) *Report and Programme, Second National Programme of Primary Instruction*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Rialtas na hÉireann (1971) *Curaclam na Bunscoile, Imleabhar 1, Gaeilge* (pp.27-71). Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair.
- Rialtas na hÉireann (1999a) *Curaclam na Bunscoile, Teanga: Gaeilge*. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair.

20 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

- Rialtas na hÉireann (1999b) Gaeilge: *Treoirínite do Mhúinteoirí*. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair.
- Roinn Oideachais (1933) *Nótaí d'Oidí: Gaeilge/Notes for Teachers; Irish*. Dublin.
- Roinn Oideachais (1934) *Revised Programme of Primary Instruction*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Roinn Oideachais (1948) *An Nái-Scoil/The Infant School, Nótaí do Mhúinteoirí/Notes for Teachers 49-54*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Rosenstock, G. (2003) *Ólann mo Mhiúil as an nGaingéis*, Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- RTÉ (2005) Radio 1, *Five Seven Live* 18 August.
- Treoirínite do na Foilsitheoirí (1999) *Guidelines for Publishers*. Unpublished.

Appendix A

Textbooks with integrated reading skills' development

Bualadh Bos, Carroll-Heinemann, Dublin www.carrollheinemann.ie/publications

Maith Thú! Educational Company, Dublin www.Edco.ie

Treo Nua, Folens, Dublin www.folens.ie

Séideán Sí, Foras na Gaeilge/An Gúm, Dublin angum@forasnagaeilge.ie

Real books with support materials available online

Áisaonad/Resource centre in St Mary's University in Belfast. Graded real books *Céim ar Chéim* at www.aisaonad.org. Excellent support materials and reading exercises.

Carroll Heinemann have 6 real books, *Léimis le Chéile*, in packs of 10 at www.carrollheinemann.ie go to *Publications*. *An Puimcín is Mó* belongs to the *Léimis le Chéile* series. It is one of the 6 real books.

Clo Iar-Chonnachta www.cloiarchonnachta.ie Go to *Foghlaimoiri/Ábhair theagaisc do mhúinteoirí* for stories and rhymes.

Cló Mhaigh Eo www.clomhaigheo.ie *Ruairí* series also on CD-Rom from Fios Feasa. Readable stories for children. CD-Roms and other material available at www.fiosfeasa.ie Children get to write to *Colmán* (Ó Raghallaigh, the author) and to follow the antics of Ruairí. They can read other emails and write their own to the site. The children's responses are authentic and Colmán answers the letters.

An Chomhairle Um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta: Information at the comprehensive website www.cogg.ie.

Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, www.naionrai.ie Go to *Ábhair thacaíochta ar díol*/Support materials for sale. *Amhráin do Pháistí, Maidin sa Naionra*. Selection of other action songs for infants also on CD. Children learn the sounds and syntax of Irish without fuss at an early age.

22 Putting a Bit of Spice into Reading in Irish

Educational Company of Ireland publishers of *Maith Thú!* have supplementary real books at www.Edco.ie. The themes of the Big Books are centred on the lives of the children or the stories are well known, i.e. *Breithlá Lili* (Lili's Birthday), *Ag Siopadóireacht* (Shopping), *An Bogha Báistí* (the Rainbow), and *An Sicín Beag* (The Small Chick), which also appears in the *Séideán Sí* series.

Folens have good Big Books, with traditional tales, for sale at www.folens.ie

The stories are on CD and there are exercises in the children's books to extend the children's understanding of the stories, i.e. *An Buachaillín Sinséir* (Gingerbread Boy), *An Rí Midas agus Bua an Óir* (King Midas) (First class) and *An Tornapa Mór* (The Enormous Turnip), *An Sionnach Glic agus an Circín Rua* (The Clever Fox and the Little Red Hen) (Second).

An Gúm angum@forasnagaeilge.ie Examples of Big Books are; *Ag Siopadóireacht le Mamáí*, *An Tusa Mo Mhamáí? Séimí agus an tSióg*, about a little boy who has lost his first tooth. *Cá bhfuil Tú i do Chónaí?* Lots of useful, but not unnatural repetition. *Ar Ais ar Scoil* is a witty little book about a boy's first day back at school. He cannot find anything, so it too also has lots of repetition. Send for the colourful, annual catalogue.

Muintearas, Tír an Fhia, Conamara *Rannta Beaga do Pháistí* (2005) (CD-Rom of rhymes to read and listen to) 091-551277. Also available are phonics charts and a CD of the long and short vowels.

O'Brien Press www.obrienpress.ie *Rírá* and *Sos* series with good support materials under *School books/Irish books*. *Sinéad ag Damhsa* is available on tape. *Sailí na Spotaí* is used in a primary school on a training video. The children are able to read and talk about it. Available free at www.pcsp.ie.