

## **4. Literacy and L1 Speakers of Irish**

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*It is argued here that the teaching of the Irish language is planned, resourced, and executed in a manner that is primarily focused on second language (L2) learners, and that this approach impacts negatively on the acquisition of literacy by native (L1) speakers. Clearly, native Irish speakers and native English speakers have different needs in learning to read and write Irish, since Irish is the first language for one group and a second language for the other. Although there has been much progress in the teaching of Irish, this difference is not being addressed in a structured, child-centred way. This paper analyses traditional approaches to teaching Irish, the Revised Curriculum, and the standardisation of Irish from the point of view of the L1 Irish-speaking child, and makes reference to similar problems in other minority languages.*

### **Introduction**

The children of Ireland can be conveniently divided into two groups. The vast majority are first language (L1) speakers of English. A small but culturally significant minority are L1 speakers of Irish. (In today's Ireland, of course, there is a third group, L1 speakers of other languages, although they are not considered in this paper.) The Irish language will form a significant part of the educational experience of all these children, and yet it is argued here that that experience is planned and executed mainly in the interests of the first group. Education centred on something other than the child is inappropriate in any circumstances, but particularly so where the subject is a language and the disadvantaged group are L1 speakers of that language. L1 Irish-speaking children are certainly small in number: the 2002 census returns only 1,174 children in the age group 3-4 years in

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*Gaeltacht*<sup>2</sup> areas as Irish speakers (CSO 2002). But their small numbers should not mask the importance of providing an education centred on their needs. Second language (L2) speakers would also be better served by being taught authentic language, rather than language modified for their benefit.

This paper considers three elements of teaching Irish literacy and the appropriateness of current approaches to L1 speakers. It assesses:

1. Traditional approaches to teaching Irish
2. The revised curriculum and
3. Language planning and standardisation.

### **A spectrum of approaches to teaching Irish**

The teaching of Irish in the primary school can perhaps be described as a continuum from ‘Irish as a Language’ to ‘Irish as Culture’. The former emphasises aspects such as vocabulary acquisition and grammar drills, and can scarcely be distinguished from the teaching of foreign languages like French or German. Linguistically speaking, of course, Irish *is* a ‘foreign’ language for the majority of Irish schoolchildren, who speak only English in their homes, families and communities. Technically speaking, though, it is better described as a second language, and it is hardly appropriate to treat Irish as a foreign language, since it is the only long-standing indigenous language of Ireland, and since Ireland is the only place where it is spoken as a community language. This realisation informs the other end of the spectrum, ‘Irish as Culture’, whose aim is something more like the socialisation of children as Irish people, comparable to the teaching of Irish history. In this approach, knowledge *about* Irish is emphasised over communicative competence. While this approach, at least in its explicit form, may be controversial, it should not be entirely devalued, as the teaching of Irish hardly has any other practical relevance to most Irish schoolchildren.

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2 *Gaeltacht* refers to areas (mainly on the western seaboard) which are officially designated as Irish speaking, though the extent to which Irish is the spoken language of these communities varies.

But what about children who speak Irish as their mother-tongue, that is, the L1 speakers of Irish? Whatever the merits arguable for one end of this spectrum or the other, no part of it is of any relevance to L1 children. There is no point in asking schools to teach a language *ab initio* to children who already speak that language natively. Attempting to acculturate them by teaching them a language they already speak is equally absurd. The teaching of Irish to L1 speakers of Irish should parallel the teaching of English to L1 speakers of English: not as a second language, nor as an exercise in socialisation, but rather as a programme of development of linguistic skills, particularly literacy.

### **The curriculum**

A Revised Primary School Curriculum was introduced in the Republic of Ireland in 1999 (DES 1999a) as the fruit of extensive work by subject experts in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and it was warmly welcomed by teachers. Among the many positive aspects of the Irish-language section are the following:

1. The heavy emphasis on spoken language. This represents the ‘Irish as a Language’ end of the above spectrum.
2. The influence of modern approaches to teaching languages, in particular the Communicative Approach.
3. The structured recognition of the difference between L1 schools (*Gaeltacht* schools and *Gaelscoileanna*, in which the curriculum is taught through Irish) and L2 schools (schools where English is the language of instruction), with a separate version of the curriculum for each group.
4. Different stages for the initiation of teaching literacy in Irish, at school entry (age 4-5 years) in L1 schools and two years later, in First Class, in L2 schools.

Despite these positive aspects of the Revised Curriculum, there are some difficulties from the point of view of the L1 speaker of Irish which are discussed below.

### **L2 comes first**

One would expect a curriculum in language X to be designed first and foremost to serve speakers of X, and that the interests of speakers of language Y would be handled as a special interest. In the Revised Irish Curriculum, however, Irish as L2 comes first (DES, 1999a:16-75) and only then is Irish as L1 considered (ibid. pp. 76-139). English speakers are treated as normative in both English and Irish language curricula.

### **No other follow-through**

It is difficult to find any substantial difference between the two versions of the Irish curriculum, aside from the delayed onset of teaching Irish literacy in L2 schools. The L1 version certainly does not represent a structured attempt to provide an Irish-language education to L1 speakers parallel to the one provided by the English curriculum.

### **School-centred: no structured recognition of L1 children**

The difference between L1 and L2 in the curriculum is *school*-centred, not *child*-centred. In L1 schools, Irish is the language of administration, the medium of instruction of all subjects (except other languages), and theoretically at least, the language of the schoolyard. In L2 schools, Irish is taught as a single subject. But an L1 Irish-speaking *child* could of course be in an L1 or L2 school, and an L1 school will inevitably have many L2 students. Indeed, in *Gaelscoileanna*, only a very small percentage of children enter school already speaking Irish. Even in the strongest *Gaeltachtaí*, according to a recent survey commissioned by *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG 2005: 41), 33% of the students entering schools are not Irish speakers (*ar bheagán Gaeilge nó gan aon Ghaeilge* ‘with little or no Irish’). These different groups of children have different educational needs requiring different approaches. Pity the poor teachers with a theoretically monolingual class, when nearly half of the children in it actually speak another language. Teachers in this situation are faced with an unenviable challenge in attempting to address the needs of the L1 speakers at the same time as the L2 learners, and the absence of a curriculum designed for mother-tongue Irish speakers leaves them entirely unsupported in this difficult task.

### No parallel structures in the English curriculum

The English language curriculum is not differentiated for L1 and L2 schools, still less for children. If the difference is relevant in one language, it must be relevant in the other.

### Irish and literacy

The curriculum essentially treats Irish as a second language only; the development of literacy and the enrichment of linguistic skills in L1 speakers is not a significant consideration. This is illustrated in the following quotes from the Revised Curriculum (DES, 1999a), in which the presumption is that the children are not Irish speakers:

*Cuirfidh foghlaim na Gaeilge ar chumas an pháiste cumarsáid a dhéanamh in dhá theanga. (The learning of Irish will equip the child to communicate in two languages) (Treoirlínte p. 2)*

*Cuirfear béim ar leith ar thuiscint na teanga ... mar chéim thábhachtach i bhfoghlaim na teanga. (Special emphasis will be given to understanding the language as an important step in learning it.) (Treoirlínte p. 4)*

*Tá sé mar aidhm ag an gcuraclam Gaeilge go mbeidh an páiste in ann Gaeilge a labhairt ar fhágáil na bunscoile dó/di fiú mura bhfuil ann ach labhairt go simplí. (The aim of the Irish curriculum is that children leaving primary school will be able to speak Irish, even if only at a simple level.) (Treoirlínte p. 9)*

*[Is é is aidhm don churaclam ná] an Ghaeilge a shealbhú. ([The aim of the curriculum is] the acquisition of Irish) (Treoirlínte p. 14)*

The four strands of the curriculum are *Éisteacht, Labhairt, Léitheoireacht* and *Scribhneoireacht* (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). Although these strands could form the basis of an appropriate education for L1 speakers, they are typical of the teaching of foreign languages, and presumably originate in such an understanding of Irish. Contrast them with the strands of the English curriculum (DES, 1999b):

1. Receptiveness to language
2. Competence and confidence in using language

3. Developing cognitive abilities through language
4. Emotional and imaginative development through language

A set of strands like this would be eminently suited to educating Irish L1 speakers. The following aims from the English curriculum illustrate beautifully the kind of education that ought to be provided to L1 speakers of Irish in their own language:

Be aware of nuances of language...[children can] assimilate what they hear and read...[develop their] ability to use language as a speaker, reader, writer ... The child learns through language, ... uses language to facilitate the cognitive organisation of concepts and ideas....[and develops] a better understanding of themselves and their relationships with others.

DES, 1999b:7-9

This last quote from the English curriculum is particularly visionary:

Glimpse the infinite possibilities of the human condition (ibid., p. 9)

Imagine an Irish curriculum that aimed to provide L1 children *'le léargas ar na deiseanna gan teorainn a bhaineann leis an daonnacht'*!

### **An appropriate curriculum**

As things stand, we have two language curricula. For the English language, we have a 'one size fits all' curriculum, regardless of the language of the child, or even of the school. We have two versions of the Irish-language curriculum, one for L1 *schools* and the other for L2 *schools*. What we need is an L1 curriculum, with a version in each language, designed for 'the nuances of language', 'ability to use language', 'to glimpse the infinite possibilities of the human condition'. Then we need two different child-centred L2 curricula. The one teaching Irish to English-speakers (at least in L2 schools) should concentrate on the achievement of communicative competence, and should take cognisance of the limited exposure these children will have to Irish outside of school. The curriculum teaching English to Irish-speakers can be more ambitious, and build on the extensive exposure they have to English language-use outside of school, as well as

the basic skills they already have acquired as incipient serial bilinguals. *Gaelscoileanna* are the odd ones out here, as they include an overwhelming majority of L2 children in an Irish as L1 environment. Such children might be best served by a hybrid curriculum of their own, much more ambitious than that in L2 schools, but emphasising the needs of L2 children.

### **Language planning and standardisation**

Great efforts have been expended on the standardisation and development of Irish in recent decades. However, almost all of this effort has been conducted by L2 speakers, and it is frequently alienating to L1 speakers. It is my opinion that it impinges negatively on the acquisition of literacy by L1 children.

There is a conflict intrinsic in any standardisation, as it automatically privileges the people whose language use is closest to the standard, and thereby disadvantages other groups. In major Yish-type languages like English (using the terminology of Fishman 1991), the standard is based on the dialect spoken by the prestige group in society. Minority Xish-type languages like Irish do not have prestige dialects: the prestige group in Xish society speaks Yish, a different *language*, not a different dialect of Xish. Speakers of various dialects of Xish have equal prestige, and thus the different dialects have equally legitimate claims to recognition. Standards in Xish languages therefore tend towards artificiality and arbitrary selection of forms. They are generally developed by language activists, who tend to be secondary speakers. This has many implications:

1. Learner language errors become part of the standard
2. Yish has a 'stealth influence' on the standard
3. Suitability for learners is prioritised
4. Learners as a group are prioritised

As Woolard (1998) says:

Movements to save minority languages ironically are often structured around the same received notions of language that have led to their oppression. Minority language activists often find themselves

imposing standards, elevating literate forms and uses, and negatively sanctioning variability.

Woolard, 1998:17

Standardisation of language can be considered in several strands: *corpus* (both technical terminology and new vernacular words), *spelling* and *grammar*. In a paper of this scope, only a very brief discussion is possible, and here we will focus on two examples that create problems for L1 speakers: artificial vocabulary and the morphology of compound nouns.

### **Artificial vocabulary**

Languages always need new words to refer to the new objects, ideas, and mores that are constantly being introduced in culture. Normally, the word for something new is borrowed with the thing itself. Lexical borrowing is very common; probably more than half of the most frequently used vocabulary of English is borrowed. There is another source for new vocabulary, of course, and that is to make it up, and this is a common approach among minority language activists. Their motivations include an ideological aversion to borrowed vocabulary, which they see as belonging exclusively to their own L1, and which they see as ‘degrading’, ‘polluting’, or ‘weakening’ their target language. They believe themselves to have the authority to change the pre-existing vocabulary of that language, even if their competence in it is limited. But made-up words create problems for L1 speakers: the words are artificial, they cannot understand them, and the whole approach devalues native speech forms.

The Irish language curriculum provides a clear example of this problem. The guidelines have a section entitled *Caint Nádurtha* (DES 1999a, *Treoirlínte* p. 3), stressing the importance of teaching natural language actually used in speech, in keeping with the tenets of the Communicative Approach. The very next section (*Na Feidhmeanna Teanga*) uses these examples:

*Ní maith liom borgaire!*

*Is fuath liom borgaire!*

*Tá an ghráin agam ar bhorgaire!*

Although this is a lovely example of language enrichment, focusing the students’ attention on a variety of ways to express the same idea, the effort

is spoiled by the use of the made-up word *borgaire* to replace the authentic word *burgar*, for no other reason than the fact that it was directly borrowed from English. Changing the word is somehow supposed to make the sentence more Irish, although it actually makes it less comprehensible. The L1 child does *not* receive linguistic development from such a lesson, but rather linguistic alienation. On the other hand, L2 speakers are not well served by this approach either, for reasons clearly explained on the same page of the curriculum about the importance of authentic language.

### Compound nouns

The English language makes extensive use of compound nouns, while the Irish language does not. But corpus development in Irish frequently uses compound nouns like *breithlá* and *scoilbhliain*, in which the slots of English structure are filled with Irish lexical elements. They contrast with the target forms *lá breithe* and *bliain scoile*. As Ó Baoill and Ó Riagáin (1990) noted with regard to standardization:

Word formation followed traditional lines except that the strong tendency shown in the written language for compound words was strengthened even more. The tendency in the spoken language is towards syntactic phrases rather than the creation of compound elements ... To illustrate this point we take the two examples: *bolgchainteoir* 'ventriloquist' and *oighearshruth* 'glacier' ... In the spoken language the tendency would be to create two noun phrases with the same morphemes to express the same meaning. Thus *cainteoir boilg* 'ventriloquist' and *sruth oighir* 'glacier', with the second element in each case in the genitive form, would be the most likely outcome.

Ó Baoill and Ó Riagáin, 1990: 185 and footnote

But it is not just their compound nature that makes these creations deviant: the order of the elements is also important. In Irish, the head of a noun phrase comes first, and its qualifier comes after, where English puts the qualifier first. *A doghouse* is a kind of house, whereas *madra tí*, with the elements in the same order, is a kind of dog. This means that the compound nouns of 'official' Irish often suggest the reverse meaning of their

intention. The phrase *feirimbhreac*, at least when spoken, means ‘a trout farm’, just as *feirm chaorach* means ‘a sheep farm’, *feirm bha bainne* means ‘a dairy farm’, and *feirm mhaith talún* means ‘a large farm (of land)’. But the term *feirimbhreac* was *intended* to mean ‘a farmed trout’, which would be expressed more naturally in Irish as *breac feirme*.

Although these ‘loan blends’ are meant to develop Irish independently of English, they end up subordinating Irish, by imposing English-language structure. In earlier strata of the Irish language, this type of compound formation was productive, and there are fossilised examples in current speech, such as *barriallacha* and *cúldoras*. But such examples hardly justify the use of such morphology in synchronic corpus development, particularly by L2 speakers in the face of objections from L1 speakers.

### International context

The problems of standardisation are not unique to Irish; indeed, they are fairly typical of Xish languages worldwide. Here are some quotes illustrating parallel problems in other minority languages.

#### **Basque**

[T]his drive for linguistic purification and isolation had probably gone too far; native Basque speakers couldn’t understand the language that the Basque purists were advocating.

Thatcher, 1998 (on-line document)

#### **Quechua and Aymara**

[U]nfamiliar words are another obstacle to popular acceptance of the new standard varieties. In standardised Quechua and Aymara, Spanish borrowings are purged ... Lexical ‘gaps’ ... are filled by archaic terms..., metaphorical extension..., or neologisms.

Luykx, 2003 (on-line document)

### **Māori**

I still tend to use words like *Hanuere* for January rather than *Kohitatea* when I write letters, because it's more familiar to me ... I'm not denying the place of these new words, but it's a form of Māori that I'm not comfortable with ... When we lose our old people who are native speakers, this form of Māori language will eventually be used more widely. This is the Māori language of the days ahead.

Kingi, 1998, cited in Benton and Benton, 2001: 445

This comment, by a native speaking Māori woman, illustrates clearly the irony involved in inappropriate language planning. If this *new* 'form of Māori' will be used when we lose our native speakers, we are not talking about language development, we are talking about language shift.

### **African-American Vernacular English**

The following is a quote from an attorney involved in a court case about the teaching of English literacy to African-American children whose variety of English deviates widely from Standard American English. It is expressive of the problems facing L1 Irish-speaking schoolchildren.

When a five year old has his language system treated as inferior from his first day of school, the resulting psychological damage is inevitable. Once this barrier is raised by school officials, the child begins to withdraw and his learning performance suffers.

quoted in MacNeil and Cran, 2005: 133

### **Conclusion**

Education for speakers of minority languages is similar to education for any minority group: it can only be expected to work if it is centred on them, on their needs, and on their priorities. L1 speakers ought to be the highest-priority group in language education, particularly in Xish languages. However, as a brief examination of the international situation showed, this is frequently not the case, and it is certainly not the case in Irish. The prioritisation of learners, the L2-centred approach of the Irish curriculum, the kind of standardisation Irish has undergone, and many other aspects of

the teaching of Irish all conspire to create obstacles to the acquisition of literacy in Irish by its L1 speakers. In reality, L1 speakers of English also suffer as a result, since they are taught inauthentic language.

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