

# Literacy and Language Learning

Reading in a First or Second Language

Editor  
Tina M. Hickey



Reading  
Association  
of Ireland



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Language Learning:  
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**Tina M. Hickey**

READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

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## *Preface*

Baineann páipéir an leabhair seo le comhdháil bhliantúil Chumann Léitheoireachta na hÉireann, agus tá ábhar tarraingteach anseo don duine a bhfuil spéis aige, ní hamháin i bhfoghlaím na léitheoireachta, ach i sealbhú teanga agus i saibhriú teanga chomh maith.

This collection of papers, arising from the Reading Association of Ireland's successful 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, will inform and interest readers, whether their main focus is on reading development in a first language, the process of learning to read a second language, or on biliteracy and biculturalism. Educators are keenly aware of the centrality of language skills in the development of children's reading skills. Research also shows us the contribution of reading skills to the learning of a second or subsequent language, whether that is in primary or secondary school, or at third-level.

Irish teachers have experience of teaching reading, not only in children's first language, but also in what is, for most children, their second language, Irish. In addition to this group, Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht and English-speakers in some all-Irish schools learn their initial literacy in Irish, before going on to acquire literacy in English. Overlaid onto this already challenging educational context is the need now to teach literacy skills to a population of children whose home language is neither Irish or English, for whom English is an additional language, and who may or may not be literate, or acquiring literacy, in their home or heritage language, in addition to literacy in English and Irish in school.

This collection addresses some of the issues associated with this complex situation, including the reading of Irish as a first and as a second language, bilingualism and reading, reading English as a second language, and aspects of the reading of English as first language, including advanced literacy skills at third-level.

*Nóirín Ní Nuadháin's* keynote paper regarding the teaching of reading in Irish gives us a fascinating view of the different initiatives and programmes that have been developed for promoting the reading of Irish since 1922. She notes that many of the aims and aspirations of early

programmes would be viewed favourably today by educators. Indeed, in many cases they are incorporated into the Revised Curriculum on Irish, with an approach that attempts to integrate reading with other language skills, and to learn from the research on second language reading. She looks in detail at the recommendations of the Revised Curriculum regarding Irish reading, and discusses the new materials available, making practical suggestions about how they might best be used to support and develop children's proficiency in reading and speaking Irish.

*Tina Hickey's* paper on emergent readers of Irish addresses the issue of how to help young readers of Irish acquire the reading fluency that is needed in order not to impede their reading comprehension. Effective word recognition requires effective decoding skills that are learned from a thorough analysis of letter-sound correspondences and a learning of the orthographical rules used in a language. She presents an analysis of the 100 most frequently used words in a corpus of 'Early Reader' books aimed at children when they are first embarking on reading in Irish, and explores the words and patterns whose fluent recognition will prove the most useful for these emergent readers of Irish.

*Fiona Lyddy, Bryan Roche and Helen Ambrose* analyze a particular challenge that faces young readers of English and Irish: the words that are spelt the same in their two languages, but are pronounced very differently indeed, such as *teach*. They look at how children's language background and the language context of the task affects their ability to recognise these words as belonging to one or other language. Children who are more dominant in Irish were more likely to process these words as Irish words only, rather than detecting the ambiguity, and this appears to help their reading fluency. Significantly, however, the authors found that all of the children, including the Gaeltacht native speakers of Irish, performed better at reading English words, pointing to a greater exposure to reading in English than Irish even for this group of native speakers of the language.

*Mattias Mac Cárthaigh* addresses the needs of these Gaeltacht L1 speakers, in particular, in his discussion of how Irish reading is construed in the Revised Curriculum. He argues that the curriculum does not take into account the different needs of young first- and second language speakers of Irish, and that it is school-centred in its approach rather than

child-centred. In his view, the focus on L2 learners of Irish, and the approach taken to issues such as the standardisation of the language and the introduction of new words, have negatively affected the acquisition of literacy by L1 speakers of Irish. He links this situation to the international context, where other minority language speakers feel that a lower priority is given to the needs of L1 speakers than to L2 learners from a language-dominant group.

*Dónal Ó Faoláin* also looks at the needs of L1 speakers of Irish learning to read, and argues that a phonics approach to the teaching of reading in Irish is in line with the Revised Curriculum, but has been difficult to implement due to a dearth of materials. He presents his own experience of developing a phonics programme for young readers in the Déise Gaeltacht, and, as in Hickey's chapter, argues that fluent reading in Irish must be based on a sound knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences which will carry a child through to the automatic word recognition they require for fluent reading. He notes that the approach he uses would also be beneficial in promoting sound decoding skills among young second language learners of Irish.

Given the more recent challenges presented by Ireland's experience of multiculturalism and multilingualism, *Charmian Kenner's* keynote paper based on her research on bilingual children in London is particularly relevant. She argues that children's success in reading English as an additional language (EAL) is influenced by their understanding of the power of literacy, and by their literacy experiences in their home language, as well as in the school language. She presents case studies of children in London acquiring literacy in English as an additional language, but in a context in which teachers encouraged their parents to support this process in the class and at home, through facilitating literacy in their first language as well. She argues that such a multilingual literacy environment positively affects the learning, not only of EAL children, but also children whose first language is English.

*Karl Kitching* presents an analysis of how teachers in Ireland are coping with the challenge of EAL children in the mainstream classroom. He surveyed a sample of teachers in a city suburb, and in considering the results he discusses issues such as grouping or lack of grouping of these

children, the skills prioritised, and the training and support required by teachers. He discusses the practical implications of his study with regard to classroom organisation, and use of a larger variety of texts, and he recommends a review of priorities regarding skills development.

*Susan Jones* presents a study of how the literacy practices of bicultural and biliterate teenagers and pre-teens in Britain affect their sense of identity. She compares the views of reading expressed by British-Asian and Welsh-English bilinguals, and examines how their reading and writing displays and consolidates their identities and links them to their two cultures.

*Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez and Lidia Montero-Ameneiro* examine the challenge of reading in English as a second language for third-level students in Spain. In particular, they look at the approach taken in the University of Corunna, which recognises the inter-relationship between the development of advanced language and literacy skills among learners of English. They analyse how some of the classics of English literature are presented to these students as they seek to acquire advanced skills in English literacy as well as in the spoken language. They note that this approach to literature in the students' foreign language provides both linguistic and cultural enrichment.

In the last section, issues concerning the ongoing inter-relationship between literacy and language skills are considered. The papers here encompass children acquiring their first literacy, including those with a reading disability who may be reading in the first or an additional language, as well as the literacy and language needs of third-level students. This allows us to look at literacy as playing an integral and evolving role in the lifelong development of language skills.

*Brian Murphy's* keynote paper discusses the importance of using an integrated approach to literacy development, which emphasizes the symbiotic nature of the relationship between oral and written language skills. This recognises the importance of developing children's oral skills as a foundation for literacy, but also accepts the significance of the increased metalinguistic awareness that accompanies literacy in increasing children's control over their language skills in general. In addition to recognising the value of supporting this inter-relationship of

oral and written language, Murphy argues that two other elements have been shown to improve literacy achievement over the school years. These are: explicit work on vocabulary development and on comprehension strategies. These impact on both oral and written language skills, and he discusses how these are best developed in the context of authentic and meaningful experiences with language and texts.

*Seán MacBlain, Angela O'Neill, Kelly Weir and Mario MacBlain* look at provisions in Northern Ireland's education system regarding pupils with dyslexia, and they note the added challenge now of identifying EAL pupils with dyslexia whose limited English may obscure their disability. They conclude that this situation and the requirements of the Northern Ireland or UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (under which schools who fail to offer appropriate provision for pupils with a disability, including dyslexia can be charged with discrimination) have profound implications for teacher training and continued professional development. They report on two small studies which examined the perceptions of primary teachers in Northern Ireland regarding dyslexia, and their judgement of their own skills in teaching these pupils, and conclude that there is a pressing need for improvement in the quality and type of pre-service and in-service training in this area.

*Brian Clancy* turns to more advanced language users, third level students. He discusses the difficulties experienced by novice essay writers in developing the analytical writing style required in university. The Learner Support Unit in Mary Immaculate College sets out to assist mature students in developing the academic writing skills they require, through one-to-one consultations that address their most common writing problems, such as writing in an appropriate style, structuring their material, and referencing other authors. The methods used will be of relevance to all those involved with supporting older learners to develop the academic writing skills they may be lacking on entry to third level, and which are critical to their success in further education.

*James Binchy*, also in the Learner Support Unit in MIC, looks in more detail at an academic writing skill that provokes considerable anxiety in students (and concern at institution level), that of accurately citing the views and opinions of other authors but avoiding plagiarism. Binchy

looks at a sample of essays from students and finds that, despite being advised to use direct quotation sparingly, novice essay writers show an undue dependence on it. He argues that there is a need for greater guidance for students, not just in the mechanics of how to include citations, but in the more advanced skill of integrating the work of others into their argument, and commenting or expanding on that work as evidence of critical thinking. Binchy notes that the aim is not simply the legalistic one of avoiding plagiarism, but of supporting students in reaching the most advanced levels of first language literacy in their academic writing and analysis.

Thus, this collection considers the development of literacy in the child's first language (in English, Irish and a range of other languages) from the very earliest stages, but also looks at the current educational context in which children grapple with acquiring literacy skills in a second and additional languages, and in which third level students are required to achieve advanced academic skills in reading and writing in their first and, in some cases, in additional languages also. It is fitting that the teaching of reading in Irish to children who speak it either as a first or a second language should make up a significant portion of this collection, given the long history in Irish education of engaging with the challenge of producing biliteracy in our schools. The inclusion of chapters on the teaching of literacies in second or additional languages highlights an issue of great relevance to Irish educators. The challenge for the future regarding reading in Ireland is to continue to develop effective approaches to promoting literacy skills, not only in English and Irish, but also in the teaching of readers for whom English is an additional language, who may or may not have literacy in their home language. A further challenge is that this must be allied with a concern to develop, not just the literacy and language skills required in the early years, but the advancement of those skills to the levels needed by the first, second and additional language users of the twenty-first century.

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