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First Language Maintenance and Second Language Acquisition of a Minority Language in Kindergarten

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1. Introduction
In some minority language situations L2 learners are grouped in the same classrooms with L1 speakers of that language. While this practice is generally necessitated by low student numbers, it is also seen as offering an opportunity for L2 learners to interact with native speaker peers, which has been found to be advantageous for language learners (e.g. Harley, 1984, Day & Shapson, 1987). However, there is some evidence that this grouping may be disadvantageous for the L1 minority speakers: Mougeon & Beniak (1991) and M. Jones (1998a, 1998b) have pointed to markers of L2 interlanguage in the language of L1 minority children in immersion in Canada and Wales, showing L2 learners to be influencing L1 minority pupils’ syntax. The grouping together of L1 and L2 learners occurs in minority language situations such as Ireland, Wales and the Basque Country, as well as in parts of Canada, and in the U.S. in Two-Way Bilingual Programs. This study looks at language contact between English and the minority language Irish in Irish-medium pre-schools or naíonraí. It focuses on the language use of children from different backgrounds, in a situation where Irish is the target language.

2. Background to Irish and the naíonraí
The vast majority of people in the Republic of Ireland are native speakers of English, and, while Irish is the first official language, it is spoken as a mother tongue only by an estimated 3% of the population (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin 1994 & 1984). A small number of districts remain which are Irish-speaking, mainly on the western seaboard. In an effort to revive Irish after independence, the State initially attempted to make Irish the medium of instruction in schools, at least for some age groups. However, this policy was abandoned in the 1960s, and Irish is now taught as a single subject to the majority of children from school entry at four years of age. Concern at declining standards of Irish in the 1970s led to the establishment of a movement to lobby for Irish-medium pre-schooling and schooling, based on the Welsh experience. A network of such pre-schools (naíonraí) and schools has grown in the last 20 years, allowing parents to opt for Irish immersion in some districts, but overall only a minority of pupils are educated through the medium of Irish.
3. Sample

An initial survey of the Stiúrthóirí (Leaders) of all Gaeltacht naíonraí collected background data on the age, sex, home language and language ability of all of the children attending Gaeltacht naíonraí. These data also allowed an assessment of the composition of each naíonra group, and indicated that in 40% of these groups in Irish-speaking districts children from English-only backgrounds were in the majority. Only 20% of naíonraí contained a majority of children from Irish-only homes, while in another 29% children from homes where both Irish and English were spoken predominated.

Using these data on the language mix within every group a sampling frame was developed from which the sixty subjects for the observational study could be drawn. For the observational study, ten naíonraí were selected, three in which at least 51% of the children came from Irish-only homes, three in which at least 51% came from English-only homes and four in which neither English-only nor Irish-only home backgrounds accounted for more than half the children.
three of these, more than half of the children came from homes where both Irish and English were spoken.) In each naíonra six children were selected, where possible two each from each language background. Data on the home language used were crosschecked with detailed survey information from the target-children’s parents, with precedence given to the parents’ reports of home language use. The final distribution of children in the observational study was: 20 children from homes where only Irish was spoken, 23 children from bilingual homes, and 16 children from English-only homes. One child was omitted from the study because a third language was also spoken in the home.

Each child was observed for two twenty-minute sessions, using the Sylva et al. (1980) observation system for pre-school children. Observation sessions on individual children were on different days, and were randomly assigned during the morning in order to sample the full routine from soon after arrival, through work, play, lunch and departure. During observation the target child wore a transmitter microphone concealed in a harness, and all other children in the group wore a similar harness so that the target child was not conspicuous either to them or the teacher. The trained observer wore earphones receiving the microphone signal so that she could hear the child even when he was turned away from her, allowing her to observe him less obtrusively. She coded the activity the target child was engaged in every 30 seconds, using a coding system based on Sylva et al’s (1980) pre-school observation scheme, with a number of additions to include specific naíonraí activities. She also noted whether the child was engaged alone, in a pair, small group or large group, and what the teacher was doing at that time. The tapescripts from the target children were transcribed in CHILDES format.

4. Target language use as a proportion of all talk

The percentage target language use by each of each of the 60 children in the observational study was computed. Figure 1 presents the summary data, showing the pattern of target language use by children from different language backgrounds, and in different types of naíonra, where Irish L1 children, children from bilingual homes, or children from English-only homes predominated.

Analysis of variance showed that home language had a significant effect (p<.006) on the children’s percentage use of the target language. The effect of the language mix in the group on the mean proportion of Irish utterances was not statistically significant (p<.14), but there was a tendency for children from bilingual homes to produce a lower percentage of Irish utterances in groups where English-speakers were in the majority.

As expected, children from English-only backgrounds spoke Irish least frequently, in only about a quarter of their utterances on average. Their percentage Irish usage was not significantly higher in Irish-dominant groups than in English-dominant groups. Thus, the data indicate that their production of utterances in the target language did not appear to be enhanced at this stage in their acquisition by being in groups that had a majority of native speakers of the target language.
The children from Irish-only homes on average spoke Irish in about half of their total utterances, and their proportionate use of Irish was no higher in Irish-dominant groups (48%) than in English-dominant groups (47%). The bilinguals were most sensitive to the mix in the group, using Irish in about half of their utterances in the Irish-dominant groups, in about a third of their utterance in bilingual-dominant groups, but in only a sixth of their utterances in English-dominant groups.

Overall, we see that the actual target language use by children in the sample naíonraí in Irish-speaking communities is skewed towards English, with 42% of children producing Irish utterances rarely during the observation period, 32% using Irish in less than half of their utterances, and only 27% of the children using mainly Irish. The effect of group composition on percentage Irish use was not statistically significant, with neither Irish L1 children nor English L1 children increasing their percentage use of Irish in Irish-dominant groups, although being in majority English L1 groups negatively affected the Irish use of children from bilingual homes. It may be that, given the difference in status of the two languages, even a minority of English speakers within a group can exert a negative effect on the percentage Irish use by Irish L1 children, rather than requiring a majority within the group. Conversely, it may be that children from English-only homes do not yet show the benefits of being in groups with a majority of Irish L1 children because they are themselves only at the early stages of acquiring Irish as L2 and are simply restricted by their own limited
proficiency in Irish. Thus, it is possible that the language ability mix in the group exerts a differential effect on minority language L1 speakers and majority language children acquiring an L2.

As expected, home language significantly affects what proportion of a child’s utterances will be in Irish. What is of concern is the fairly low average Irish use by Irish L1 speakers, even in groups where they are in the majority. It might be expected that Irish L1 speakers would produce more than half of their utterances in Irish when they are engaged in activities in Irish-medium preschools. This relatively low level of target language production by the Irish L1 children is discussed elsewhere (Hickey 2001).

It should be noted that, while the percentage use of the target language gives an overall picture of how the language is faring in these groups, it does not give us enough information about the salience of the two languages in these groups. A child who produces 20 utterances in a given time-period, of which 50% are in the target language, has a different impact on the linguistic environment of the group than a more talkative child who produces 200 utterances, 50% of which are in Irish. Thus, in order to examine how salient the target language is within a particular naíonra it is helpful to look at the mean number of utterances in that language.

**5. Mean number of utterances in the target language**

Figure 2 presents the mean number of target language utterances produced by the children from different home language backgrounds in the different types of group. Analysis of variance indicated that the composition of the group (p<.03) had a significant effect on the mean number of target language utterances as had the children’s home language (p<.01).

The L1 Irish speakers produced a mean of 50 utterances in the target language during observation, but this output was significantly influenced by the group composition. Their mean Irish output was between 50 and 61 utterances in Irish-dominant and bilingual-dominant or mixed groups, but it was significantly lower (23 utterances on average) in groups where there was a majority of children from English-only homes. Thus, while the Irish mother-tongue children’s percentage use of Irish stayed fairly stable across group type, their total verbal output was significantly reduced, and their mean number of Irish utterances was halved, on average, in groups where English mother-tongue children were in the majority. In fact, in such groups, the average number of target-language utterances by the Irish L1 children was about on a par with the Irish output of the English mother-tongue children (21 utterances on average).

The mean number of Irish utterances produced by the children from bilingual homes was 24, very similar to the mean output of the children from English-only homes. However, the children from bilingual homes produced significantly more utterances in the target language in groups with a majority of Irish L1 or bilingual children, and significantly less often in groups where children from English-only homes predominated. Thus, the bilinguals used Irish
least in the groups where English L1 children were in the majority, more in the mixed groups, and most in the groups where Irish L1 children were in the majority, acting as chameleons, as bilinguals so often do. It appeared that the bilinguals were most susceptible to the mix within the group, showing their highest Irish usage levels (a mean of 33 Irish utterances) when in groups where Irish L1 children predominated, but their Irish output was even lower (mean of 9 Irish utterances) than that of the English-mother-tongue children when in groups dominated by English L1 children.

![Fig. 2 Mean Number of Target Language Utterances](image)

L2 learners of Irish from English-only homes produced an average of 23 utterances in Irish during observation in these naíonraí. Their mean use of the target language was about the same whether in groups dominated by L2 learners or L1 speakers of the language.

These data indicate that being in an Irish-dominant group did not increase the Irish production of the L2 learners, but being in a group where English L1 children were in the majority resulted in significantly fewer target language utterances from the bilinguals and Irish L1 children. Clearly, the effects of contact in the classroom between a minority and a majority language are complex, and are inevitably influenced by the differing status of the languages in the wider community (see Watson, 1989). Even in these communities, which are officially designated as Irish speaking, children hear English spoken in a range of influential domains. Data from the 1996 Census 1996 show that as many as 39% of those reporting themselves as Irish speakers in these Irish-speaking
communities stated that they used the language on a weekly basis only or even less often. The pervasive influence of English may lead children to perceive English use as the norm. Despite the intention of providing a context where Irish is the norm, the naíonra cannot insulate itself fully from such attitudes and influences. Instead, the naíonra is a microcosm, which reflects the sociolinguistic norms prevailing in Irish-speaking districts. It is likely to model those norms more closely than the formal classroom, since in the naíonra children move around as they engage in self-directed activities, choosing their interlocutor themselves, rather than passively listening to the teacher for long periods.

Given the ubiquity of language contact in these naíonra groups, it is helpful to look at the attitudes of the naíonra Leaders to language management in the naíonra to see how they view this issue. The sixty children in the observational study attended ten naíonraí, and each of those ten Leaders took part in a structured interview, which explored in detail their attitudes to the language mix in their group, the difficulties they encountered, and their priorities. A summary of some of the results from these interviews is presented below.

6. Interview with Leaders

One of the aims of this interview was to examine how the naíonra Leaders perceived their goals, and they were therefore asked to rank-order their objectives from a given list. As expected, it was found that their priorities were influenced by the language mix in their group. Table 1 presents the results. While these data are based on a small sample, they provide some interesting differences in priorities, which are worth exploring, and these data are then examined in light of the survey data from the total population of 55 Stiúrthóirí in Irish-speaking districts who completed the postal questionnaire.

**Table 1 Objectives of Leaders in Different Group Types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Majority Irish L1 speakers</th>
<th>Majority from bilingual homes</th>
<th>Majority L2 learners of Irish</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition of Irish as L2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering general development</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing social skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a chance to play</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting language enrichment of L1 Irish children</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. No sub-group of Leaders agreed on their first priority, and therefore there is no mean ranking of 1.
The official aims of the naíonraí are the promotion of children’s general development, the acquisition of Irish as L2 and/or the enrichment of Irish as L1. In groups which had a majority of Irish L1 children (Column 1), the highest ranking was given to promoting general development, followed by promoting L1 Irish enrichment. In groups which had a majority of children beginning to acquire Irish as L2 (Column 3), the two objectives of promoting the acquisition of Irish as L2 and providing an opportunity for children to play together scored the highest mean ranking by Leaders. In groups with a majority of children from bilingual homes (Column 2), the highest ranking was given to promoting L1 enrichment, followed by fostering general development.

There is some indication here of a variability between the weight individual Leaders attach to certain objectives, depending on the mix of language backgrounds in their groups. It is of interest to view these results in conjunction with those on mean numbers of Irish utterances in Figure 3. Where Leaders prioritised L2 acquisition and general development (in the English-dominant groups) the Irish L1 children produced the lowest mean number of utterances (23). Where the highest priority was given to enriching Irish as L1 (in bilingual-dominant groups) the children from Irish-only homes produced the highest mean number of Irish utterances (63).

6.1. Special time with L1 Irish speakers

One of the questions explored with Stiúrthóirí was whether they ever devoted special time for activities with the children who were fluent in the target language. Their replies showed that only two of these ten Stiúrthóirí ever grouped Irish L1 children together for an activity, while the majority said that they never did. Some gave practical reasons for this, claiming that it was not possible where there was only one teacher in the group. However, others replied that they felt it would be inappropriate to put Irish L1 children together deliberately sometimes, stating as reasons that they did not like to make distinctions between children, or that they believed that the L2 learners were more in need of attention.

Two Leaders expressed concern that the Irish L1 children were being disadvantaged by the emphasis on acquiring the language as L2; while one commented that she used the L1 speakers as models to help her communicate with the L2 learners. She said that while she mixed the children during the daily activities, at lunchtime she tried to group the L1 children together in order to facilitate their use of Irish, which acted as a good example to the other children. In the latter view Irish L1 children are again seen as useful models, rather than as having their own linguistic needs deserving attention, but at least this results in the deliberate promotion of talk in Irish between them, something that other Leaders thought impractical or inappropriate. In answer to another question, only two Stiúrthóirí said that they ever spent about 15 minutes per day with a small number of children grouped by Irish ability.
6.2. Activities
Other data were gathered from the larger survey of 55 Stiúrthóirí (the population of leaders in Irish-speaking districts). They were asked to indicate what were the most common daily activities in the naíonra. The findings showed that the most usual daily activities were role-play in the ‘home corner’, jigsaws, painting, songs and rhymes and building bricks. Two-thirds of the sample said that they read a story each day, but it is surprising that one third of Gaeltacht naíonraí had stories only on a weekly basis, citing practical difficulties. A training course on the use of stories for L1 enrichment revealed that some Gaeltacht Stiúrthóirí believed it best to postpone storytelling for the whole group until the second term when the L2 learners would have some comprehension, despite the fact that this meant not reading to the L1 Irish speakers and bilinguals when they were ready to benefit from it. Again, the lack of an Assistant was cited to explain why the group could not be divided, yet there seemed to be no exploration of having a parent or local person fluent in Irish attend for a few minutes each day to read a story or occupy the other children while the Stiúrthóir read to the L1 speakers. The assumption was that this language-centred activity would be introduced only when the group as a whole was ready for it.

However, there is evidence that just such activities are urgently needed by the L1 children: Denvir (1989) has argued that the Irish of young native speakers is attenuated, with reduced vocabulary and accuracy. Corson (1993) noted that minority language children whose language has been marginalized might arrive in school with relatively underdeveloped L1 language skills. The Irish produced by the young native speakers in this study showed them to be in need of L1 enrichment in vocabulary and syntax (Hickey, 1999) yet at the time of this study there appeared to be little, if any, explicit provision for such directed L1 enrichment, although individual Stiúrthóirí may have tried to cater for these needs. A module on this topic has now been added to the training of Stiúrthóirí and it is hoped that this will go some way towards redressing the balance.

6.3. Work planning
More than half of all of the Gaeltacht Stiúrthóirí reported that they did not have a work plan for the year. Two thirds had a term plan, and 80% had a weekly plan. This low level of long-term planning does not augur well for promoting progress in children. At present the naíonraí operate without an official curriculum, on the assumption that the service should be tailored by individual Stiúrthóirí to the needs of the children in her group. However, the predominance of weekly planning and the absence of a general curriculum increase the risk that children will not make the maximum progress possible during their attendance at a naíonra. The mixing of different levels of language ability requires greater planning, in order to challenge each child appropriately. Therefore, the development of a language focused curriculum based on that used
in the Language Acquisition Pre-school (Bunce, 1995, Rice & Wilcox, 1995) would now be eminently desirable, with specific objectives for language ability groups in different domains.

7. Discussion
These data raise some important questions for immersion education in minority language situations, as well as for language revitalisation. In the mainstream Canadian experience of immersion it is customary for children to begin with no competence in the target language. However, in minority language situations such as Ireland, Wales, the Basque Country and French-Ontario first- and second language speakers are not separated. There is a tendency to view this situation in terms of the advantages it brings for L2 learners, without an adequate assessment of the effects on the minority language speakers. Mougeon & Beniak (1985, 1991) noted that in advanced language shift situations such as in Ontario, the presence of children from English-speaking homes in the French-language schools attended by francophone children can create difficulties, slowing down the academic progress of the francophone students, and influencing aspects of their language use. Following a study of similar negative effects on the L1 of Welsh native speakers in mixed groups, M. Jones (1998a) has argued that the mixing of children from Welsh-only backgrounds with pupils who are acquiring Welsh as L2 needs to be assessed in terms of how this situation is affecting both groups of children.

Looking at the effects on L2 learners first, G. E. Jones (1984, 1991) found some evidence for enhanced command of features such as exophoric reference and the imperative in the speech of older primary school L2 learners who had had some contact with L1 peers. However, the Irish data presented here point to the observation that, while there may be long-term gains for L2 learners from schooling with L1 children, in the early stages of acquiring a minority language such as Irish, and in the absence of deliberate intervention, majority language children are more likely to elicit English from the Irish L1 children than modelled use of the target language.

Turning to the effect on the Irish L1 children, we saw that the minority language children became significantly less talkative when they were in groups with a majority of English-speaking children. The data show that the Irish L1 children produced less than half as many Irish utterances in English dominant groups than they did in Irish dominant groups, a graphic illustration of the relative status of the two languages. However, the speech of these L1 Irish children shows them to be in need of L1 enrichment in vocabulary and syntax, for which there has been no explicit training provision until recently in the naíonra service, although individual teachers may have striven to cater for these children’s needs.

Swain (1981) noted that in order to achieve full bilingualism, a second language should be introduced later for minority language speakers than for majority language speakers. However, the obvious solution of separating the L1
and L2 speakers of the target language is not feasible given the difficulties of running this service in rural areas, where the numbers of children in each group would not usually warrant separate provision for them. There is, however, anecdotal evidence that some parents operate such separation in that they choose not to send their Irish speaking children to the naíonra in order to delay their exposure to English as long as possible. Unfortunately this also denies these children experience of pre-school education, and the proven cognitive and social advantages attendant on that, which is especially regrettable for children who may live in quite isolated rural areas with relatively little socialisation with peers.

Thus, the options for L1 minority language children should not be between a service focused on their L2 learner peers or no service at all, but should address their particular needs in terms of curriculum, work organisation and practice. This requires both a philosophical reorientation and changes in teaching methods in order to be able to ensure that the linguistic and educational needs of L1 Irish speakers will be catered for in the naíonra, as well as the needs of L2 learners.

A general curriculum with graded objectives for the different language ability groups is required, such as in the Language Focused Curriculum developed for the LAP pre-schools (see Bunce, 1995, Rice & Wilcox, 1995). In addition, in-service and pre-service training needs to address the issues work planning and organisation so that the differing language needs of these groups can be adequately addressed. Baker (1997) and Baker & Jones (1998) have also stressed the need for adequately resourced training in catering for the different language needs of mixed pre-school groups, and have argued for increased staffing to allow for some separate teaching as well as integration.

For such training to be effective there is a need to promote discussion among Leaders about their perceptions of those needs. This would require a greater awareness of the rights of the minority language child to full linguistic development, greater knowledge of the later stages of normal L1 acquisition of Irish, and of the sociolinguistic factors which negatively influence Irish use. It is important, therefore, that the resistance noted among some Leaders in this study to ‘making distinctions’ between the children should be discussed in terms of the differing status of Irish and English, the requirements for full bilingualism, and the current sociolinguistic context in Gaeltacht areas. These Leaders showed a laudable commitment to the principle of treating children equally, but they seemed to think that addressing the special needs of the minority L1 children would be elitist (an argument that has parallels in education with those who are against addressing the needs of gifted children). Equality of treatment should indeed be a guiding principle in education, but this can be misinterpreted to mean that all children receive the same treatment, regardless of their different needs, instead of addressing those needs.

Consideration is needed of the message sent to L1 Irish children when they observe that English predominates even in the naíonra, and that activities are geared only to the low levels of L2 of those English speakers. In-service courses
on language enrichment for L1 children have now begun to be offered to groups of Leaders. These courses examine ways of providing more challenging linguistic tasks (e.g. daily story telling at an appropriate level, home corner activities with teacher supervision, verbal games requiring more elaborate responses) for L1 speakers on a regular basis. The use of such activities also requires consideration of methods of grouping by language ability in order to encourage informal Irish use between children. In-service training on sociolinguistic issues will consider issues relating to minority language use, and explore ways of helping to make children and parents aware that the Leader and naíonra recognise and value the special skills of Irish L1 children, and that the further development of those skills is an operationally defined aim of the naíonra.

Explicit training in the use of differential learning and positive reinforcement techniques to support Irish use among the children would also be desirable, and would have the effect of highlighting the fact that use of this minority language is valued explicitly in the naíonra in all interactions, rather than only in the official interactions with the Leader. It is possible to discuss language choice even with pre-schoolers, using TV characters as exemplars for the languages, and exploring their awareness that in the naíonra they will be praised for speaking Irish like ‘Hiúdáí’, rather than English like ‘Barney the Dinosaur’. Naturally, L2 learners cannot be penalised for speaking English rather than the target language in the early stages of acquisition, but neither should minority language use by the Irish L1 children be taken for granted, or be seen only as an aid to the L2 learners. Given the differing status of the two languages, then every support for the minority language in mixed ability groups is significant.

Such steps are necessary in order to ensure that the attempt to revive Irish through enlarging the pool of L2 learners does not short-change the L1 speakers who need active language maintenance and enrichment. There must be continuous monitoring to ensure that Irish immersion does not result for the L1 Irish speakers in unofficial immersion in English. At present these L1 minority language speakers are vulnerable to language shift, yet their linguistic needs are in danger of being overlooked in the face of their apparent fluency, while the L2 learners’ needs are given priority. What is required is political acceptance of the need to adopt a balanced pedagogical approach to addressing these differing needs if the L1 minority language speakers are to consolidate their mother tongue and establish networks of using that language while they are in groups with English speakers at the early stages of acquiring the minority language.

**Glossary**

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gaeltacht</td>
<td>District recognised officially as Irish-speaking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naíonra</td>
<td>Irish-medium pre-school</td>
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<td>Stiúrthóir</td>
<td>Leader or teacher of naíonra (see Endnote 1)</td>
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Endnotes

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1. It is important to recognise that, while officially designated as Irish-speaking, only a proportion of the residents in these areas are competent speakers of the language. Ó Riagáin (1997) has examined the decline of Irish in these areas.

2. The term Stiúrthóir (Leader) is used by the naíonraí to emphasise their commitment to the principles of free play and exploration in early childhood education, rather than formal schooling.

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