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In Defense of Decoding

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0. Introduction

Literacy instruction in primary schools in Ireland has fallen on hard times of late. Although the 1999 Revised Curriculum for Irish (Government of Ireland, 1999) specifically states that the recommended communicative approach encompasses all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), it is often interpreted as emphasizing oral at the expense of written language. Perhaps as a result, research of the last decade shows that pupils’ Irish reading ability is suffering. While research on reading in Irish has been fairly limited, it shows rather disappointing results. A study conducted by the Department of Education and Science in 2008 found that “in approximately one third of classes, pupils had significant gaps in their skills of word recognition and reading comprehension” (DES 2008:60). More recently, Gileece et al. (2012) found attitudes toward reading in Irish declining among older children, even in Irish immersion and Gaeltacht schools, where skills are presumably higher than in the schools under consideration here. Finally, the latest evaluation of Irish schools (DES 2013) found Irish lessons to be unsatisfactory in 20% of classrooms inspected and 24% of student outcomes were unsatisfactory, well above the percentages for English and mathematics. Thus, there are grounds for concern, confirmed by reports from Irish teachers and scholars to be discussed below.

1. Irish teaching in primary schools

Irish is taught at all grades throughout the Republic, in three distinct types of school. Gaeltacht schools are based in officially designated Irish-speaking communities and teach

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1 We gratefully acknowledge the support for this study from a Marie Curie International Fellowship grant. A version of this paper was presented at the 2013 NAACLT annual conference and we thank the audience at that presentation and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.
through Irish or bilingually. Irish is also the medium of instruction for all subjects except English in *Gaelscoileanna*, Irish immersion schools where English is the home language for most pupils. Ninety-five percent of Irish schools, however, teach through English, with Irish as a required subject in all classrooms. Only this third type of school is considered here.

Despite evidence (Hickey and Stenson 2011) that Irish orthography presents particular challenges to L2 learners in the early stages of language study, a surprising consensus has emerged in the teaching community in Ireland that Irish spelling is more regular and easier than English spelling. Accordingly, materials for the Irish primary curriculum offer little explicit instruction in the rules underlying orthographic conventions and assume ready transfer of English literacy skills. Little attention is given, moreover, to preparing teachers specifically for Irish literacy instruction, as will be seen below.

This paper argues for more explicit teaching of decoding skills in the early stages of Irish reading instruction and more support for such an approach. We begin by describing two studies and data from them will be presented throughout the paper as background and support for our arguments; these are based on several threads, including international reading research on both L1 and L2, the role of L1 transfer in second language acquisition (SLA), and a preliminary analysis of Irish spelling regularities.

### 2. Interview data from teachers and specialists

It was decided that a qualitative research design would be most appropriate in exploring the research questions. Denzin (2009:149) noted that the Cochrane Qualitative Research Methods Group (CQRMG) adopts a “broad, but conventional definition of qualitative research, encompassing specific methods (interviews, participant and non-participant observation, focus groups, ethnographic fieldwork) data types (narrative), and forms of analysis.” Two qualitative studies were conducted, consisting of semi-structured interviews, one with Irish language specialists, and the second study with primary school teachers, to gather views on standard practice and common challenges in teaching Irish reading. The first study included people who work with Irish professionally in various capacities: secondary and university teachers of Irish, journalists, teacher educators and curriculum developers. Thirteen participants, 8 male and 5 female, were interviewed in Irish regarding their views on the teaching of Irish reading, the challenges of Irish

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2 Mason (2003) notes that semi-structured interviews are the type of interviews most frequently found in qualitative research. Their aim is to ensure comparability across participants in the issues explored but also flexibility the sequence in which questions are asked, and in how or whether some areas might be followed up with different interviewees.
spelling and related issues. Responses were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify recurring themes and subthemes in the responses.

The second study comprised interviews with primary teachers in English-medium schools, who teach Irish as one of their classroom subjects. The same methodology was used, but interviews were conducted in English to avoid deterring potential participants who lacked confidence in their Irish. Teachers were asked about general priorities in the teaching of Irish, the role of reading in Irish classes, and the methods and challenges of teaching Irish and Irish literacy. Nine teachers (including one principal) were interviewed, 3 male and 6 female, with experience covering the range of primary levels. The main themes to be discussed here include the status of reading in Irish, the teaching of decoding, teachers’ confidence in their own Irish skills, preparation of teachers for teaching reading, and unwarranted assumptions by fluent speakers about the spelling system. Adult learners’ difficulties with reading are also briefly discussed.

2.1 The status of reading in Irish. A significant theme emerging from both specialist and teacher interviews concerned a perception of secondary status for Irish literacy instruction in primary classrooms. Several teachers indicated a firm belief in the importance of prioritizing oral Irish, and reference to the secondary role of reading instruction.

1.  

   a. Is í an aidhm is mó atá ag an múinteoir anois ná an Ghaeilge labhartha.

      The teacher’s main goal now is spoken language. (M1)³

   b. My priority has always been getting them to speak it. I really don’t care too much about any other aspect. (PT1)

   c. I don’t think there’s enough emphasis on teaching reading. We’re getting a lot of—it’s all about the phrases and the speaking Irish and them understanding Irish. (T1)

   d. …what I want is for them to do- [sic] is to be able to speak Irish, to hear it spoken with different accents, to hear it spoken as a real language, and I am much more concerned about that than about teaching them reading… (T2)

³ Codes following quotations identify the participants by their professional roles with respect to Irish: T=primary teacher, M=secondary teacher, O=teacher educator, P=principal, S=other kinds of specialist. Some participants had more than one role, signaled by double letters.
Such prioritization of oral Irish is relatively recent; a sense of historical decline in attention to Irish literacy was shared by language specialists, teacher educators and teachers alike:

2. a. Níl an bhéim chéanna ar an léitheoireacht agus a bhíodh sna bunscoileanna anois...is cúrsaí cumarsáide go léir a bhíonn acu, agus cúrsaí comhrá agus mar sin ann.

There isn’t the same emphasis now on reading as there used to be in the primary schools … it’s all communication and conversation and such. (S2)

b. Ní chaithim féin mórán ama ag ullmhú múinteoirí don léitheoireacht...Níl siad ag léamh móran, bhuel na daoine óga atá mise a múíneadh. Ach tuigim féin an príomhthábhacht atá ag an Ghaeilge, ná an teanga labhartha.

I don’t spend much time preparing teachers for reading…they [student teachers] don’t read much, well, the young people that I teach. But I understand that the primary importance of Irish is the spoken language. (MO1)

c. Because what we’re expected to teach now is a totally different product than—it was all written with us, when we were learning Irish, but now…we’re teaching the children to speak Irish as well, but we didn’t really learn to speak Irish ourselves. (T1)

d. ...bhi siad an-diúltach faoi agus [nocht siad an tuairim:] “conas go mbeadh an iomarca seo á dhéanamh sa Ghaeilge?’….mhothaigh me nach raibh an práinn [sic] no an tábhacht chéanna ag baint leis...

[at a workshop for teachers]...they were very negative about it and [their attitude was:]“why do too much of this [reading] in Irish?”…I felt that there wasn’t the same urgency or importance to it [Irish literacy].  (O4)

e. ...dúirt mé “léitheoireacht na Gaeilge agus litriú” ... agus deir sí “I don’t really bother doing either; the children hate it and I’m not too mad about it myself”....Feiceann siad go bhfuil rudai nios tábhachtait agus nach bhfuil an práinn céanna [sic], agus b’fhéidir nach dtugann muid stádas ceart don léitheoireacht...

...I said [to a colleague that this interview would be about] “Irish reading and spelling” and … she said “I don’t really bother…” …They see more important things [to do] and not the same urgency, and maybe we don’t give reading the proper status… (O4)

Given these attitudes, it is imperative to compare what is actually happening in Irish language classrooms with the recommended approaches. The Revised Curriculum and Guidelines for Teachers for Irish (DES1999), aimed at learners of Irish as an L2, recommend that Irish be the medium of instruction for Irish lessons and informal use of Irish throughout the school day is advised to reinforce oral communication skills, which
have been the focus in the first three years of Irish instruction. While the curriculum places primary emphasis on oral skills, it explicitly mentions all four skills. The guidelines also recommend using a variety of approaches in teaching reading, to build linguistic awareness, promote active learning and encourage pleasure reading in Irish.

Some adherence to this recommendation was noted in certain teachers’ comments, indicating that they do try to use storybooks and other materials to encourage Irish reading for pleasure, rather than relying solely on textbooks and accompanying exercises.

3. a. I wouldn’t stay with the [Irish] textbook...the text is boring for a start. (T3)

b. I think that they learn how to fill in blanks, they learn how to read just awful...textbooks, that mean nothing and that they care less about...I would take bits of a book that was an actual storybook…rather than just do a textbook. I didn’t use textbooks. (T2)

c. I’d use anything from props to puppets to IT, dependent on the topic.... I’d use a wide range. But obviously we’d have to supplement. (T5)

Despite these indications of some effort to go beyond the basic language texts, other responses suggest heavy reliance on textbooks and workbooks.

4. a. ...[designing creative activities] was taking a lot of my energy as a teacher, so gradually...I’ve had to space out my energies, so I have become more reliant on the books. (T1)

b. My feeling is that the poorer the teachers’ standard of Irish and the less the interest they have in it, the more they’re flogging textbooks. (PT1)

c. ... there was a huge resource of Irish books, and I’d ask...teachers if they used them and they were going “noo”— They were using the textbook. (T6)

This supports the findings of Harris et al. (2006) and Hickey (2001), who found variety of Irish books or genres in short supply in many classrooms, with reading and writing activities from a single textbook seen as merely reinforcing or testing oral learning.

4 “Is ar thuiscint agus ar labhairt na Gaeilge atá an phríomhghníomh sa churaclam Gaeilge, ach chun cumarsáid iomlán a dhéanamh na páistí in ann a gcuid smaointe a bhreacadh sios i bhfoirm scríofa, comh maith, agus beidh páistí eile in ann iad a léamh. (An Ghaeilge: Treoirlinte do Mhúinteóirí, p. 10)
’TThe primary emphasis in the Irish curriculum is on understanding and speaking Irish, but for full communication, children will be able to express their thoughts in written form as well, and other children will be able to read them.’
2.2 Teaching decoding in Irish. The second salient theme to emerge from the data concerns provision of explicit decoding instruction in Irish reading, i.e., instruction on the relationship between sounds and spelling that is at the core of phonological awareness (Ehri 2007, Ehri and Wilce 1987, Ellis 1997, Perfetti 1997). The most common form of such instruction is through the various teaching programs known collectively as phonics. Although phonics materials do exist for Irish (e.g., BELB 2011), respondents indicated that they are rarely used in English–medium schools. Such explicit instruction in Irish grapheme-phoneme relationships has been shown (O Faoileáin 2006, Hickey 2007) to be quite limited, and the teachers in our study confirmed these findings, indicating that while explicit decoding may be taught (typically through phonics instruction) in English reading lessons, it is rarely revisited in Irish.

5. a. That [decoding] is definitely a part that I neglect a bit—it is there in the curriculum, but I’ve had very little guidance in how to teach it… (T1)

b. I don’t teach spellings; I teach meanings. (T2)

c. Caithfidh mé admháil nár chuir mé aon bhéim riamh ar fhorbairt scileanna léitheoireachta sa ghnáthrang Gaeilge.

I have to admit that I never put any emphasis on developing reading skills in the ordinary Irish classroom. (MS1)

2.3 Teacher confidence and proficiency. Part of the reason for the limited attention to Irish orthographic conventions seems to lie with teachers’ low confidence in their own Irish skills in generally, or their reading/writing skills in particular.

6. a. I think the biggest challenge is, a lot of people are worried about their own levels [of Irish], going ‘I’m not good enough, I’m too nervous’… and teachers sometimes drop back into English maybe quicker than they should. (T6)

b. I’m very confident speaking Irish in the class…but written Irish on the board—I’m always afraid of making mistakes and that’s where I’m not comfortable. (T1)

c. …deireann siad liom…agus tá siad ag rá leo féin ‘nil a fhios agam an bhfuil sin ceart.’

They [other teachers] tell me … and they tell themselves ‘I don’t know if that’s right.’ (M2)

d. Bíonn siad buartha faoin a gcuid gramadaigh [sic], bíonn siad buartha faoin a gcéanúní agus an blas atá acu…. Agus litriú chomh maith, sea.

They are worried about their grammar, they’re worried about their dialect and accent...And spelling as well, yes. (M1)
Indeed, comments of the teacher educators suggest that this lack of confidence among teachers may be partly justified. In particular, they noted a tendency to neglect attention to the pronunciation of spoken Irish. This is noteworthy, since such neglect makes it hard for teachers to help learners relate spellings to pronunciations when they undertake to learn written Irish.

7. a. Mhúin mé sa Ghaeltacht ar chúrsa samhradh sa Ghaeltacht...agus bhi scanradh orm ar an gcaighdeán a bhi ag na múinteoirí eile.

I taught a summer course in the Gaeltacht …and the [low] standard of the other teachers shocked me. (M2)

b. Bhí mè ag glacadh leis gur léitheoirí líofa a bheadh i gceist le ábhair oidí ach, ar an drochuair, ní ‘hin mar atá.

I was assuming that student teachers would be fluent readers, but unfortunately, that’s not how it is. (O3)

c. Ní thuigeann siad an tábhacht atá le séimhiú agus urú—seo na daoine a bhfuil céim acu sa Ghaeilge agus atá ag ullmhú don mhúinteoireacht.

They don’t understand the importance of lenition and eclipsis—this is people with a degree in Irish, preparing to teach. (MO1)

d. Tá rudaí eile, na consain caol a bhíonn deacair dóibh, na défhoghair a bhíonn deacair dóibh, b’fhéidir nár múíneadh riamh do na daoine seo, níor miniodh riamh cén chaoi a ndeirtear iad sin, mar gheall ar an nGaeilge a bheith mar dhara teanga [acu]. Agus fiú amháin na consain, tus consain focal, ch, bh. Fágtar amach na séimhithe go minic, go mionmhinic.

There are other things, the slender consonants that are hard for them [student teachers], maybe they were never taught how these are pronounced, because Irish is their second language. And even the consonants—initial consonants of word, ch, bh. The lenitions are often left out, very often. (O3)

e. Go minic ni bhionn siad in ann na fuaimeanna a aithint. They are often unable to recognize the sounds. (SO1)

f. Bhí agallamh ar bun againn le a lán daoine óga...dúradh liom gur múinteoirí, bunmhúinteoirí ochtó faoin gcéad acu, agus go raibh an Ghaeilge chomh dona ag ‘chulte dhuine acu, ná a bhformhóir, is a bheadh sí ag aon triocha duine a bhualfheadh muid isteach ón tsráid, rud a scanraidh mé beagán.

We had an interview with a lot of young people…I was told that 80% of them were primary teachers and that all, or most, of them spoke Irish as badly as any 30 people we might pull in off the street, which scared me a little. (S1)

These observations were confirmed by the Chief Inspector’s report (DES 2013), which cited teachers’ own competence as an important factor in quality and effectiveness of Irish instruction. (DES 2013:49).
2.4 Preparation to teach Irish and Irish reading. In fairness to teachers, it must be said that relatively little attention is given either to student teachers’ language development, as indicated in (8), or to Irish-specific reading instruction techniques in pre-service teacher education, as shown in (9).

8. a. *Ó mo thaithí féin...*gearradh siar ar chuid mhaith de na huaireanta a bhiodh ann chun teanga, an teanga féin a fhoghlaim.*

From my own experience ... the hours [in teacher education] that there used to be for learning the language itself have been cut back a lot. (M2)

b. *Tá daoine ag teacht chugam anois, mic léinn a theastaíonn uathu [sic] a bheith ina múinteoirí amach anseo, agus níl an tacaíocht ar fail dóibh chun Gaeilge labhartha, ná chun a gcuid Gaeilge a labhairt nó a úsáid ar ard-leibhéal.*

People are coming to me who want to be teachers and there is no support available to them for spoken Irish or to speak or use their Irish at a high level. (M1)

9. a. *...*agus ní chaithimidne mar theagascóirí go leor ama leo le iad a chumasú le tabhairt faoi sin.*

…and we as instructors don’t spend enough time to enable them to undertake that. (O2)

b. *Caithfidh na múinteoirí tacú leis an léitheoireacht. Ach ní dhéanann siad é agus ní chaithim féin móran ama ag ullmhú múinteoirí don léitheoireacht.*

Teachers have to support reading. But they don’t and I don’t spend much time preparing teachers for reading. (MO1)

This was echoed by a primary teacher reflecting on her lack of preparation for the teaching of Irish reading.

10. I wish I had more training in how to teach it. (T3)

In other cases, the low level of explicit instruction in Irish reading appears to be due to lack of interest on the teacher’s part (cf. 2e above), and/or a lack of appreciation of the contribution of reading to supporting oral language development.

2.5 Assumptions about Irish spelling. Despite the crisis of confidence documented above, several teacher educators, as well as some teachers themselves, seem to assume that Irish spelling is somehow significantly easier than English.

11. a. *Irish is so much simpler than English, because a sound is a sound.* (T6)
b. *Ar shlí amháin…is dóigh liom go bhfuil cuíd mhaith den Ghaeilge b’fhéidir nios simplí...*  
In a way, I think that much of Irish is maybe simpler… (S3)

c. *Deirtear go bhfuil litriú na Gaeilge i bhfad níos fusa ná litriú an Bhéarla.*  
Irish spelling is said to be much easier than English spelling. (MS1)

Additionally, when asked how well the spelling of the *Caighdeán Oifigiúil* [Official Standard] corresponded to their of spoken dialect, fluent speakers tended to report the spelling as reflecting their own pronunciation well (regardless of which dialect they speak). Such beliefs may be partly responsible for the lack of attention to Irish spelling and decoding skills. But as shown by studies of reading performance (Harris et al. 2006, DES 2008) and other work (Hickey 2001, Parsons and Lyddy 2009a, b), the assumption that Irish spelling is transparent and can just be picked up as vocabulary is learned seems clearly unwarranted, as will be argued further below.

2.6 Other learners of Irish. It is not just schoolchildren for whom a lack of Irish literacy instruction poses learning problems. In the first author’s experience of teaching university-level Irish in North America over many years, adult learners, already fluent readers of English, also report difficulties in understanding Irish spelling, and resultant problems in vocabulary retention. Participants in the study familiar with this population of Irish learners confirm that experience.

12. *Is cuimhneach liom Meireacánach ag rá liom...go rinne sé iarracht Gaeilge a fhoghlaím agus d’éirigh sé as: ‘It [spelling] makes no sense at all!’ a dúirt sé liom.*  
I recall an American telling me…that he tried to learn Irish and gave up: ‘It [Irish spelling] makes no sense at all!’ he told me. (S2)

Few if any textbooks for adults give more than cursory attention to Irish spelling patterns and teachers confronted by adult learners of Irish are as ill-prepared to deal with their needs as with those of children. Indeed, even the most fluent and experienced teachers who have not encountered this population can be entirely unaware of this particular problem until they meet adult learners with no experience of Irish orthography:

13. *Is dócha gurb é an chéad uair uair riamh domhsa, gur mhúin mé glantosaithéoirí ná nuair a chuaign mé go Ceanada amraídh, agus d’oscall sé sin mó shuíle. Nior léir domh na deacrachtaí a bhí ann...”*
The first time I ever taught absolute beginners, I guess, was when I went to Canada last year, and that opened my eyes. I wasn’t aware of the difficulties...

Our position is that the lack of attention to teaching decoding in Irish may short-circuit the development of Irish reading as an integral and beneficial part of language learning, and perhaps contribute to the disappointing results mentioned above. In the sections that follow, we discuss the results of the studies described here in light of the general research on literacy instruction and argue the need for Irish teachers to understand Irish spelling and explicitly teach decoding skills.

3. Why teach decoding?

For over 100 years now, reading education literature has been dominated by a vigorous debate, which has been popularly dubbed “the reading wars,” a controversy revolving around differing views of the reading process and associated educational philosophies. Briefly, the debate centers on competing theories of the proper instructional focus in beginning (L1) literacy. These theories correspond to different views of the nature of language processing in reading. The top down view holds that understanding of meaning proceeds from the text and its context without mediation of the spoken language, whereas the bottom up view of reading involves association of the written symbols with phonemes of the spoken language, a process known as phonological recoding, or decoding. The best-known methodological approaches associated with these different reading-world views are the Whole Word approach and Phonics. The International Reading Association’s position statement holds that there is no one best method and most pay lip service to a “balanced approach” drawing on techniques from both traditions, but the debate continues and reading instruction seems to vary widely as a consequence (Adams 1994, Snow and Juel 2007). Although there is evidence that whole word recognition is part of the reading process, at least in certain situations and certainly for English speakers, a comprehensive review of reading research by the U.S. National Reading Panel (NICHD 2000) found that a preponderance of recent work now indicates that instruction in phonological awareness critically aids both reading fluency and comprehension. This research is reviewed next.

3.1 The importance of phonological awareness and decoding. Adams (1994:58) argued that a basic level of analytic ability makes learning to read much easier, and that letter knowledge is the best predictor of later reading acquisition, perhaps because of the similarity of many letter names to the sounds they represent. Of relevance here is the fact that for children acquiring literacy in Irish as their L2, the Irish sounds represented by the same letters often differ from the sounds they represent in English, making explicit instruction in their values even more important (cf. 3.2 below). Explicit phonics instruction was early on shown to help beginning readers, for example by Chall (1967); this is supported more recently by the National Reading Panel report. Stuart and Coltheart (1988) have also found that beginning readers with phonics skills retain sight words faster
because their alphabetic knowledge provides a basis for expecting certain connections between written and spoken words.

Ehri (1992, 1995, 1999, 2007) has developed an influential theory of how emergent readers learn sight words. The phases in this development can be summarized as progressing from a *Pre-alphabetic phase* when children have no awareness of relations between sounds and letters, to a *Partial alphabetic phase*, characterized by limited knowledge of letters-sound pairings but primary reliance on initial or other salient letters in words. In the *Full alphabetic phase*, children can match all the letters with sounds and segment words into phonemic units. Finally, in the *Consolidated alphabetic phase* they extract patterns of letter-groupings across different words and store them as units, enabling them to read and remember multisyllabic words by sight.

Since many of the most frequent words encountered by learners in the early stages of reading are irregular in their grapheme-phoneme correspondences, a tendency to teach them as whole or sight words has emerged. But Ehri has argued that that the whole-word route to sight word learning is less effective in developing word recognition to the level of efficiency required for fluent reading than starting from an understanding of phoneme-grapheme correspondence, “the glue that holds the words in memory for quick reading.” (Ehri 2003:2). Stanovich and Stanovich (1991) likewise showed that teachers who help pupils to analyse words promote automaticity; so does frequent practice with texts containing high frequency words.

Similarly, according to Stuart, Masterson and Dixon (1999:118), it is the development of good phonological recoding skills that distinguishes better from weaker readers, who rely unduly on sight vocabulary learned as wholes. Ellis (1997) cites several other studies that indicate an important role for phonological awareness in young children learning to read and spell. The provision of explicit training in phonological awareness over several years has been shown to have a positive effect on both reading and spelling. Reading and spelling do not develop simultaneously, but have a bootstrapping effect on each other as learners proceed through Ehri’s stages.

In light of these findings, alongside the difficulties reported by teachers in developing pupil literacy in Irish without systematic use of decoding training, an *a priori* case can be made (see also Hickey 2007) for providing beginning readers with supports to develop the necessary phonological awareness and decoding skills specifically for the language that they are learning to read. What must be factored in here is that reading in a second language poses particular challenges, which additionally vary between languages. Murtagh’s (1988:18) summary of reading research in the context of second language acquisition concludes that low levels of skill in the L2 can short-circuit the reading process and impede use of efficient strategies. This will be taken up below.

### 3.2 Reading in a second language

Verhoeven (2000) showed that the smaller second-language vocabularies of L2 learners seriously impede their reading. Limited second language proficiency may ‘short-circuit’ (e.g. Alderson, 2013, Bernhardt & Kamil 1995)
the reading process and cause even readers who are good at reading their native language to revert to less effective strategies in their second language. Limited proficiency also impedes reading processing. Droop & Verhoven (2003) note that limited exposure to the L2 may result in weaker word representations and thus to slower and less accurate reading. The decoding of second language readers is less automatic because of their restricted knowledge of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules and orthographic constraints of the L2, so that the lower-level decoding takes up more of the processing time. Even advanced language learners with good native language reading skills read differently in their L2 because their less automatic word recognition skills in their second language impede their ability to focus on text meaning.

There is evidence to this effect in Irish reading. Hickey (1991) found that Grade III children in mainstream schools read aloud in English, their L1, at a rate of 115 words per minute, but in Irish at a rate of only 75 words per minute. Parsons and Lyddy (2009b) also showed that children in mainstream schools read Irish significantly more slowly and with more errors than children in Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna. This can be attributed to their poorer general proficiency in Irish, and weaker vocabulary. Reading rate is improved by practice, but it is those readers with the slowest rate who find L2 reading most stressful. The ‘Matthew Effect’ (Stanovich, 1986) uses the biblical analogy that ‘to those that have, is given’ to sum up the position of learners who do not develop automatized word recognition skills and therefore do not enjoy reading, unlike successful readers. Because they do not enjoy it they avoid it and thus are less likely to develop the skills they need to escape this vicious circle.

This directly relates to the issue of reading fluency, identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) as one of the five critical components of reading. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) argued that the ability to extract meaning from print depends on the development of word recognition accuracy and reading fluency. Pikulski and Chard (2005: 510) emphasize the need to strive for fluency from children’s earliest experiences with print through developing effective decoding skills. Rather than viewing these decoding skills as the less interesting end of the reading process, they argue that automatic decoding skills are essential for successful reading comprehension. This automaticity is even harder to develop for second language readers, and therefore we argue that efforts to support early decoding skills will improve L2 reading fluency, along the lines argued above for L1 reading fluency.

Further arguments for decoding emerge from consideration of cross-linguistic investigations of orthography, where automatic decoding and phonological recoding have been found to play a role across a wide range of reading populations, languages, and orthographic systems.

3.3 Cross-linguistic perspectives on orthography. Many language learners encounter an L2 writing system that appears not to diverge markedly from that of their first language. Rather than having to deal with a logographic system or new alphabet, these learners find that their first language literacy maps quite conveniently onto their second language. However, as Bernhardt (2003) notes, even where the mapping is convenient, the mere existence of a first language makes the second language reading process
considerably different, because of the nature of the information stored in memory. While visual memory may match up with the input text, syntactic or phonological memory may not. Even languages using the same alphabet can differ in the transparency of their orthography.

A series of cross-linguistic studies of orthographies over the past couple decades has shown that literacy development is affected by the nature of the orthographic system that represents the language in written form. Seymour, Aro and Erskine (2003) compared children learning to read English with those learning twelve other European languages. Although all readers showed evidence of phonological processing, they found that children master reading much more quickly in languages with simple syllable structures and transparent (i.e. regular correspondences of one sound to one symbol) spelling systems than in languages like English with more complex syllable structures and orthographies. They propose that complex orthographies require more complex processing that take longer to learn. Ziegler et al (2010) confirmed this hypothesis in a study showing that reading speed varied with the orthographic consistency of the language and that, while phonological awareness is important for fluent reading in all languages studied, its strongest effect was in the more complex languages like English. Only in the most transparent orthographies, e.g., Finnish, did phonological awareness show less robust effects on reading. One interpretation of these results is that for highly transparent languages like Finnish, targeted teaching of phonological awareness is unnecessary for rapid reading acquisition, as decoding skills develop automatically. Other studies of languages of varying transparency (Spencer and Hanley 2003, Katz and Feldman 1983, Ellis et al 2004) show that the more consistent an orthography, the more early readers use phonological decoding rather than relying on whole-word recognition.

We turn now to consideration of the position of Irish in this crosslinguistic continuum. The study reported in Hickey and Stenson (2010) looked at just this question. Examination of the most frequent 100 words in a corpus of children’s literature compared with a similar study of English by Stuart et al. (2003) showed that the most frequent 100 words were indeed spelled more consistently in the Irish corpus than in the English one. Specifically, 71% of the words in the Irish corpus had regular spellings, compared to only 52% of the English words. Since Irish is indeed more consistent than English in the early reader vocabulary examined, those regularities can be helpful to beginning readers.

Nevertheless, Hickey and Stenson argued that the complexity of the Irish spelling rules still is problematic for learners, especially L2 learners, despite their greater consistency. Given the complexity of Irish spelling and the findings of Ziegler et al. (2010) showing the importance of decoding skills in reading such languages, this constitutes a further argument that beginning Irish readers would benefit from learning to decode.

There is evidence that successful older Irish readers do decode when they read: Parsons and Lyddy (2009a) studied the errors of children in English-medium, Gaeltacht, and Irish immersion schools on a variety of reading tasks, and compared their errors with those of previous research on English (Stuart and Coltheart 1988, Ehri 2007) and other languages (Wimmer and Hummer 1990, Ellis and Hooper 2001, Spencer and Hanley 2003, Hoxhallari et al. 2004). These demonstrated that children reading regular orthographies tended to make mostly non-word errors, indicating a greater use of
phonological decoding in the reading process, whereas readers of less consistent orthographies like English made more real-word errors or simply did not attempt to read unknown words, indicating a greater reliance on whole-word lexical retrieval and only partial analysis of the words. Parsons and Lyddy found that the weakest Irish readers showed the highest proportion of word substitution errors (including substitutions of English words for Irish ones), while the best readers made more non-word errors, indicating that they were using decoding strategies in their reading.

This raises the issue of the relationship between orthographic consistency and transparency or simplicity. These must be considered separately, as argued in Hickey and Stenson (2010). On this basis, we argue in the next section that the widespread assumption that what is known from English will transfer and be usable in reading Irish without explicit help is naïve at best.

3.4 Transfer in second language acquisition. In most schools, reading is introduced in English before Irish, as recommended by the curriculum guidelines; these embody an assumption that literacy skills developed in English will transfer automatically to Irish reading:

> De ghnáth, ní thosófar ar léitheoireacht na Gaeilge go foirmiúil roimh rang 2 i scoileanna T2. Faoin am sin, beidh bunús maith ag an bpáiste i léitheoireacht an Bhéarla agus b’fhéidir go dtarlódh méid díirtithe den traschur scileanna.

Usually, reading in Irish is not begun before second class in T2 {English medium} schools. By that time the child will have a good basis in reading English and perhaps a certain amount of transfer of skills will take place.” (Curaclam ar line/Curriculum online: p 3/9)

Comments of teachers also reflect this expectation:

14. a. In English we go by the phonics…you don’t do phonics in Irish...you get to 1st class and all of a sudden…the kids are expected to just read. (T3)

   b. We don’t formally teach it… people just kind of assume that they’re going to learn. (T2)

Unfortunately, these assumptions are often unjustified, leading to deficits at higher levels as well. One of the specialists interviewed summarized the situation, arguing that it is too often assumed at a given level of instruction that incoming learners have achieved the goals of the previous level, without checking whether or not they have in fact reached the assumed standard:

15. ...mar sin, tá sé cosúil le bréag mhóir nach bhfuil aon duine sásta admhachtáil gur áil di agus fágann sé go bhfuil daoine anois ag dul isteach sna coláistí oiliúna, mar shampla, agus is dóigh ardtistiméaracht -- arghrát bainte amach acu i nGaeilge, ach dháireire gan scríobh ná go minic labharta na Gaeilge go maith acu, ach gur éirigh leo na ceachtanna is gá a dhéanamh leis na scrúdaithe a phhasáil. Agus fágann sin, nuair a théann siadsan thríd an bpróiseas, muna bhfuil córas
Ziegler and Goswami (2005) highlight the need to adjust teaching to the orthographies involved. The complexity and distinctness of the Irish spelling system call into question the assumption that ability to read in English transfers to Irish in a helpful way.

In fact, transfer in second language acquisition is a much more complex process than is often recognized. When our participants, and the curriculum guidelines, talk of transfer from English, the assumption seems to be that this will always be helpful. But SLA scholars have long known that transfer of knowledge to a second language can be either positive or negative, depending on what grammatical features the two languages share (Odlin 1989, Lado 1957, Gass and Selinker 2001). While work by Ringbom (1987) suggests a more prominent role for positive transfer than was evident in early SLA literature, the fact remains that similarities between L1 and L2 are essential before positive transfer can take place.

Transfer across writing systems is likewise acknowledged to rest on similarities and differences among orthographies, such that the greater the distance between L1 and L2, the more time needed to acquire the new writing system. Discussing L2 acquisition of English and Persian (written with the Arabic alphabet), Odlin writes:

Since the two languages share only the alphabetic principle, there is little if any positive transfer aiding the acquisition of English by Persian speakers or the acquisition of Persian by English speakers, though there is probably some advantage arising from having already learned to encode and decode written language.

Odlin (1989:126)

Although Irish and English share the Roman alphabet, where their spelling conventions are concerned it is far from clear that there are enough similarities in orthographic conventions of the two languages for such reliance on positive transfer from English, as evidenced in the quotations above. While young Irish readers can be helped by what they have learned previously of left-to-right linear order of text and the alphabetic principle that they have acquired in English reading, this is not to say that they have no more to learn when starting to read in Irish. It cannot be assumed that the letters of the Roman alphabet have the same values in Irish as in English. There are many significant differences.
First, the phonetic values of consonants in English, while similar in their primary articulatory features, cannot be treated as identical in Irish, where the same alphabetic symbols can represent phonemically distinct secondary articulations of palatalisation and velarisation (slender and broad consonants in traditional terminology). Given that beginning L2 readers lack full control of the spoken Irish phonological contrasts, explicit acknowledgement that a given symbol always represents two distinct phonemes in Irish (differentiated by combining with other letters) is critically important to call learners’ attention to the phonological contrasts between the two languages. Other domains where it is unreasonable to assume that learners can work out the patterns for themselves include the conventions for signaling consonant mutations (mh, dh, bp, nd, ts, etc.) and the digraphs signaling single vowels (ao, eoi, ei, etc).

Given the enormous differences in the phonological values assigned to the same graphemes in English and Irish, more negative transfer than positive can be expected from the casual approach currently taken to Irish reading. Since learners tend to seek similarities to what they already know (Odlin 1989, Ringbom 1987) the risk of falling back on familiar conventions of their own language is high. They will look for similarities to familiar spellings. Not finding them, in words such as gceannóidh, bhfuil, they will stumble, and perhaps give up. Seeing spellings that are similar to known English words, they will be more likely to apply the English values if they have not been taught the patterns that underlie the Irish ones. There is evidence that this happens in Irish; the authors have observed and teachers cite cases of English pronunciations being applied in words such as teach (/tiːʃ/ for /t'ax/), bean (/biːn/ for /b'an/), rang (/ræŋ/ for /raŋg/), bóthar (/bɔθər/ for /boːhər/), seisear (/si:zər/ for /ʃeɪzər/).

4. Conclusion

The teaching of Irish reading in primary schools is a significant enterprise that requires adequate support. Teachers and experts interviewed indicate that the teaching of reading in Irish is increasingly being sidelined, for a combination of reasons. A significant factor is teacher preparation, in terms not only of Irish language proficiency, but also of explicit training in how Irish orthography works, and pedagogical approaches to teaching it. While fully supporting the importance of reading beyond the textbook, promoting comprehension, and reading for pleasure with real literature, we have argued here that attention to language-specific spelling rules at the outset will enable learners better to recognize and pronounce unfamiliar words as they read, thus enhancing both vocabulary acquisition and syntactic skills in spoken Irish, as well as the will to read and use the language more. An added complication is the tension between teaching phonics and whole words which is transferred to the teaching of reading in Irish as an L2. Teacher and specialist interviews indicate a reliance on a whole-word “see-and-say” approach that dominates Irish language classrooms. Although some phonics materials are available and in use in Gaelscoileanna, most teachers and teacher educators interviewed indicate that they are rarely used to teach reading in English-medium schools.

Recent research on reading, however, has highlighted the centrality of phonological decoding, even in the most complex orthographies such as English. The more consistent the orthography, the faster the decoding skills are acquired, and reading
fluency follows from that. As Irish spelling is, in fact more consistent than English, in early vocabulary at least, teaching decoding should help learners acquire the patterns of sound-spelling relations needed for fluent Irish reading, although both curriculum and teacher interviews seem unaware of the value that such instruction could have.

While it is true that previous experience in reading one’s native language can be transferred to a second language, little attention has hitherto been paid to the fact that such transfer can be either positive or negative. Given the extensive differences in spelling conventions of the two languages, transfer of English spelling rules to Irish is likely to be negative transfer. This can be attenuated by attention to Irish-specific spelling rules and decoding skills in Irish reading education. Without explicit awareness of Irish sound-spelling correspondences, the consistencies can be overshadowed by the differences from familiar English spelling conventions, making it seem that, in the words of the frustrated learner cited in (10) “it makes no sense at all.” This is all the more true for young learners who have not yet mastered their L1 system when they begin learning their L2. Thus, we have argued that, not only can Irish spelling be taught as a semi-regular system, it must be.

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