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Indigenous Language Immersion: The Challenge of Meeting the Needs of L1 and L2 speakers in Irish-medium preschools

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Introduction: Ireland’s Language Policy
Over 150 regional and minority languages are spoken in the EU, by up to 50 million speakers (European Commission, 2004:9). In the Republic of Ireland, an officially bilingual state, Irish is ‘the first official language’ and English is also recognised as an official language. Census 2006 showed that, while about 1.66 million people (42% of the population) reported that they were ‘able to speak Irish,’ over 60% of these said that they ‘never’ speak the language or speak it less often than weekly. Even in officially designated Irish-speaking communities Irish does not appear secure, with only 57% (36,500 persons) there speaking Irish daily.

Thus, Irish is in the position of being both an official language and an endangered language. Efforts at maintaining Irish must now also adapt to the context of the recent rise in immigration into Ireland, which has led to one of the highest levels of linguistic diversity, with 158 languages now spoken (McPake et al., 2007). Catering for these needs in a state already trying to maintain a minority language raises particular challenges, since the language needs of new groups can be perceived as threatening to indigenous minority languages, particularly if resources are spread too thinly.

Most children in the Republic now learn Irish as a single compulsory subject from school entry at age 4-5, and it is the second language for the majority. About 5% of pupils (33,000) attend the 168 primary and 43 post-primary Irish-medium schools in the Republic and Northern Ireland. In addition, there is a system of Irish-medium preschools (naíonraí) for children aged three to four years. These preschools have been particularly popular since they began in the 1970s, and currently serve over 3,000 children per year in 167 groups. It is these groups which are the focus of the research discussed below.

Irish-medium preschools
Irish-medium preschools or naíonraí aim to help young children develop Irish naturally either as their mother-tongue (L1) or as their second language (L2), in the context of a high-quality preschool. Evaluations (e.g. Hickey (1997) showed high parental satisfaction with these preschools, good outcomes for Irish as L2, and an increase in the use of Irish at home.
Most effective L2 learning activities

Consideration of the most effective language learning activities in these immersion preschools revealed some interesting findings: the five activities the Leaders of these groups rated as the most effective for promoting Irish were: songs/rhymes, story time, home-corner, group games, and card matching. However, when Leaders were asked which activities actually occurred most frequently in their groups, the ‘most effective’ language activities were found to occur with surprisingly low frequency, while less language-centred activities received most time. This highlights the need for training for immersion educators to promote the most effective planning of language-promoting activities.

There may also need to be greater review on what the most effective activities for language-learning are in the immersion setting. Observational data on the children's language use showed that role-play in the home-corner appeared to be less effective in the early stages of L2 learning than the Leaders believed, simply because the children’s limited L2 causes them to switch to English in this context. This means that activities normal to a mother-tongue preschool setting need to be adapted for an L2 immersion setting. For example, home-corner may be more effective if L2 learners are supported through some Leader input or ‘scripted’ support for what they wish to say, rather than being leaving them to switch to their L1.

The activities which were found to be most successful at eliciting Irish use among the L2 learners in the naíonraí were the more structured ones, such as playing games with rules (e.g. card games or movement games), songs and rhymes, daily routines such as lunch and clean-up, and supervised activities such as art and jigsaws. This points to the need to establish a balance in immersion between these more structured activities that provide appropriate input and scaffolding for L2 learners, and free-play activities that have other cognitive/social benefits.

In addition, the data pointed to a need to engage in more comprehensive and long-term work planning to ensure that children continue to make progress over the year towards a supported experience of the most language-rich activities such as role-play and storytelling. Teacher training for these immersion preschools has now been developed to increase awareness of the need to plan the language aspect of every activity and to promote children’s Irish language development more effectively. In addition, some language support materials for parents have been developed including CDs of rhymes and songs and stories.

Concerns and Challenges

One concern of recent years is that the concentration on teaching Irish as a second language to the majority of children has distracted attention from the language needs of the minority of mother-tongue speakers of Irish. A small number of naíonraí operate in Irish-speaking communities, and here their brief is to develop these children’s mother-tongue skills in Irish, as well as their social and cognitive development. However, because the population of these areas is not uniformly Irish speaking, these groups usually contain L2 learners of Irish in the same classrooms as the mother-tongue speakers. These young Irish L1 speakers may not be getting the supports they need, even in Irish-medium preschools and schools,
due to a prioritisation of the needs of L2 learners. Low levels of Irish use by L1 Irish speaking children in the *naíonra* have been found when they are doing activities without an adult’s supervision (Hickey, 2001, 2007), and the children’s Irish shows evidence of attenuation and convergence with English. Baker and Jones (1998) note that research shows that young minority language speakers need L1 enrichment to compensate for the reduced number of interlocutors and domains of use available to them and their more restricted exposure to the language.

Added to that is the evidence from a survey (Hickey, 1997) of the parents of the native speakers of Irish that showed few literacy activities in Irish in their homes, which means that many of these Irish speaking children do not receive the enrichment of being read to in Irish regularly at home. Rather than compensating for this disadvantage, interviews with the Leaders of *naíonraí* where L1 speakers and L2 learners were mixed showed that some of them even delayed language-rich activities such as story-telling or reading to the L1 speakers until the L2 learners in the group were judged to be ‘ready’ for them. Clearly a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach which prioritises the language needs of L2 learners does not promote awareness of, or provision for, the urgent needs of mother-tongue minority language speakers with limited sources of input. An example is given below of the result of this approach, looking specifically at the types of input offered to the children.

**Input offered**

Examination of the input from adults in the *naíonra* indicates consistent attempts to simplify the language to make it accessible for L2 learners. There was a tendency to focus on helping L2 learners to acquire basic phrases e.g. how to ask permission and indicate preferences, and basic body, colour and shape terms, as well as counting and the days of the week. In the example below the Leader and her assistant are trying to get the L2 learners to use basic colour names, and in the process overlooking the language needs of the Irish L1 child (TC, target child). This example gives a flavour of the language used in managing the group and its simplification for L2 learners, and the lack of differentiated provision for the L1 speaker here.

### Example 1

**Leader:** *Cén dath atá ar *geansaí atá ag Name?* What colour is X’s jumper?  
(No marking of noun following preposition)

**Leader:** *Anois fan go bhfeicfidh tú anois.* Now wait till you see now  
*Cén dath atá ar *geansaí *Ainm?* What colour is Name’s jumper?  
(No marking after proposition and no genitive marking on name)

**Leader:** *Anois!* Now (Warning, trying to get the child’s attention)

**Child 1:** *Bán.* White  
**Asst:** *Anois!* Now!  
(Adamnishment, looking at a child who is not listening).  

**Child 2:** *Dearg.* Red  
**Asst:** *Bándearg!* Pink! (white-red, supplying correct term)

**Child 2:** *Bándearg.* Pink  
**Leader:** *xx ar bríste atá ar *Seán?*  
xx on Seán’s trousers?  
(No marking on name after preposition)
Here the language needs of the L1 Irish-speaker have not been addressed when he needs a colour term missing from his vocabulary, because the focus is teaching basic colour terms to the L2 learners. The example also illustrates adaptation of input to simplify it for L2 learners, but this input does not offer the kind of enriched language needed by minority language L1 children.

Other examples showed the tendency for mother-tongue Irish speakers to switch to English when an L2 learner addressed them in English or played in parallel to them. The children seemed to have interpreted the agenda of these preschools as ‘(try to) speak Irish to the adults, but with other kids, speak English’. Interviews with the Leaders in the pre-schools indicated some lack of awareness of the need to group the mother-tongue speakers together at times, with statements such as: ‘Why would I give native speakers any special attention?’ and ‘In my opinion the beginners are in greater need of attention.’ Other research (e.g. Valdes, 1997) on mixed groups in immersion has highlighted the potential dangers of such attitudes for minority language speakers, with the input offered to them in mixed settings containing fewer questions, less feedback, more limited vocabulary, and more repetition than is suitable for language enrichment among native speakers of a minority language.

**Applications beyond this sector**

Overall, the results from Irish-medium preschools are positive, in offering quality preschooling where children make significant progress in acquiring Irish as a second language. However, minority language communities must be aware that groups or classes where mother-tongue speakers are mixed with second language learners require differentiated provision. Rather than treating L1 speakers of minority languages as ‘mini language teachers’ for their L2 learner peers, there is a pressing need to address their own linguistic weaknesses, to develop a greater range of vocabulary, styles and functions in their first language, often lacking in the case of a minority language. Mixing second language learners with mother-tongue minority language speakers requires us to examine the sociolinguistic factors which affect attitudes to speaking the target language, since even young children are aware of the lower status of some languages compared to others. Also required is recognition of the need to target L1 speakers’ accuracy, vocabulary, self-esteem and networks, alongside helping L2 learners to acquire the language.
References


