

Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School:

A Review of Research and Development.
John Harris and Lelia Murtagh

/1999 Research Report 25, Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann.

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From Ireland derives some of the most outstanding quantitative research on language minority education. This report derives from Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann (ITE), the state-sponsored body concerned with research on linguistics and language teaching. Combining reliable, valid and suited-for-purpose language testing, large representative samples of pupils and detailed statistical analyses, a series of publications from ITE have become internationally recognized as 'state of the quantitative art'. This book continues that trend.

This 515 page report on Irish in primary schools impinges on educational policy showing that a paradigm shift is needed among teachers in the strategies and content of Irish language teaching and learning. Broad-based partnerships, inter-agency cooperation with teachers at its centre, providing new resources for teaching and learning Irish, enlisting parental and community support are components of the solutions offered by the report.

The book summarises and reviews the work on Irish in primary schools carried out by the

Institute in the last 10 years. It details research based on direct observation of Irish lessons by primary-school Inspectors and on questionnaires administered to pupils and parents. This information is, in turn, linked to test data on achievement in spoken Irish and general academic ability, as well as to factors such as relative material disadvantage and social class.

The report shows that pupils are relatively well disposed towards the Irish language itself and towards the idea of integrating with the Irish-language-speaking 'group'. But motivation and actual commitment to learning Irish is less positive. However, a substantial minority of pupils do not believe that they have the support and encouragement of their parents in the task of learning Irish. Where parental encouragement is present, it has a strong positive effect on pupil achievement in Irish and an even stronger effect on pupils' attitudes and motivation to learn Irish.

Parents are generally positive in their outward attitudes about Irish and supportive of their children being taught the Irish language

in school. In practice, however, many parents have a skeptical or indifferent attitude to their children learning Irish. Parents are much less likely to praise their child's achievements in Irish than in other subjects, and they are less likely to help with homework in Irish than in other subjects.

Pupils tend to describe Irish lessons and curriculum materials as boring, old-fashioned and repetitious. They would like lessons and courses which are more modern, more fun, more realistic and which place a greater emphasis on conversations and games. This seems to link with pupils tending to have a poor estimation of their own ability in Irish compared to their self-concept in relation to other subjects. A substantial minority are nervous about speaking Irish in class. This may, in part, derive from a sociopolitical context and the minority language treatment of Irish in Ireland, despite Irish being the first official language.

Not surprisingly, the report finds an answer in the communicative approach to language learning. The research shows that classes with a greater emphasis on communication achieve higher in a variety of ways than other classes: they have higher achievement in Irish, pupils show higher levels of attention and interest during the lessons, and report lower levels of anxiety about speaking individually in class.

In contrast, classes where pupils spend a much time on routine (language-practice) reading-aloud tend to have lower achievement in spoken Irish and less positive attitudes to Irish. In addition, where a lot of time is spent on routine reading aloud, pupils tend to higher levels of anxiety about the Irish lesson, and display lower levels of attention and interest in the lesson.

Observation of individual pupils by Irish

School Inspectors showed that about half of all pupil behaviour during the Irish lesson consisted of the pupil speaking individually. The results also showed that (i) pupil speech is not produced very often in the context of real communication or of meaningful negotiation, (ii) pupils with lower levels of ability in Irish speak less often than other pupils, (iii) when pupils with lower levels of ability in Irish are silent, they are less attentive to the lesson than those with higher levels of ability who remain silent, and (iv) pupils speak more often and for longer in classes that emphasise communicative teaching activities.

The value of this publication is the presentation of a thorough evidence base to make well-supported statements about the state of Irish language teaching, and therefore to make clear recommendations for policy, provision and practice. The reported research is a model of gathering relevant, detailed and robust data, interpreting the data with clarity, and subsequently making pragmatically valuable suggestions for development in language teaching. The model shows how parents, teachers, inspectors and pupils themselves can be represented and engaged in research that is technically sophisticated as well as directly related to policy-making and classroom practice.

Note

- i ISBN: 0-946452-96-2