

Bilingualism in School Settings in Ireland: Perspectives on the Irish L2 Curriculum

Muiris Ó Laoire

Institute of Technology, Tralee, Ireland

1. Introduction

There has been considerable attention paid over the years to learning Irish within the context of immersion bilingual programmes (e.g. Cummins 1977, 1978; Ó Laoire and Coady 2002). Such studies have emphasised the value-added cognitive dimension of studying Irish within an immersion education context with findings that are consonant with bilingual programmes elsewhere. Less attention has been paid, however, to the teaching and learning of Irish in non-immersion settings, with the notable exception of Harris and Murtagh (1999). The vast majority of Irish students study Irish within such a context, i.e. Irish as a school subject for one hour daily in primary schools for eight years (on average: 1,600 hours) and a further exposure of 35 minutes daily on average for five days a week (over an academic year of 30 weeks for five years). This gives a total of 2,3000 hours on average not including homework, private tuition and courses in the *Gaeltacht* (The Irish language speech community). It needs to be pointed out from the outset that there is no recognition in terms of curriculum and syllabus of any linguistic differences between learners of Irish as L1 and learners of Irish as L2. There has been a sustained insistence, rather, on a single syllabus for native and non-native speakers of the language, a situation, which has worked to the detriment of L1 and L2 learners alike. As a result, over the years, syllabuses have made over-ambitious demands on Irish L2 students and have remained patronizing and unchallenging for Irish L1 students.

2. The new syllabi: background

In 1985 the CEB (The Curriculum and Examinations Board) set out a blueprint for the development and implementation of a new language curriculum. The document, entitled *Language in the Curriculum* initiated a process of sustained curriculum review and renewal. Referring to outmoded curricula in Irish, the need for new syllabi was emphasized. This was to counteract unsatisfactory findings with regard to the syllabi then in place. In particular, it found the aims of the Irish courses to be vague and unrealistic, with no graded objectives and fluency in Irish is expected of students at all stages of their schooling. There was also concern expressed about the deterioration in the standard of Irish including an over-emphasis on literature in the syllabus and unsatisfactory teaching practices encouraged by the examination system. Dissatisfaction was also directed at the excessive prominence of reading and writing. Students and teachers were frustrated by a syllabus, which did not facilitate development of oral competency. New common syllabi for immersion and non-immersion programmes alike for L1 and L2 learners, prompted by new common syllabi in French, German, Spanish and Italian espousing a communicative paradigm were introduced in the late 1980s in post-primary schools and have only recently been implemented in the primary curriculum.

It is argued in this paper that the shift to communicative language teaching has been by and large useful in language instruction for bilingualism but that the underlying potential to foster bilingualism in the English-speaking areas has been untapped to a considerable extent. The object, therefore, is to re-examine the role of the L2 curriculum in the overall context of bilingualism in Ireland, to re-appraise its potential, particularly within an additive bilingualism model and to delineate the content of the syllabus within such a context.

3. The context: language policy and pedagogy

There is no fully articulated general language policy in the Republic of Ireland that would bolster a vibrant acquisition policy. In the absence of such a policy, the question that needs to be answered and addressed is: to what extent does learning Irish in schools at present guarantee rates of reproduction of sequential bilinguals to ensure consolidation and extension of the speech community?

This question has not yet been fully addressed because the orientation of Irish language pedagogy within the framework of bilingual reproduction has been sidetracked for a considerable time now by two inter-related developments in Irish education in the eighties and nineties: i.e., expansion in primary and post-primary education and subsequent curriculum development.

Expansion and development in post-primary education in the seventies and eighties brought ever-increasing numbers of students into the system. Among these were considerable numbers of less successful or less-academically oriented pupils who had difficulty in adapting to the dominant educational model. (Ó Dubhthaigh 1978, Ó Laoire, 1994; 1997). This resulted in concern about unprecedented rates of failure in Irish in the public examinations and about a general deterioration in standards. As stated earlier, in the context of general curriculum reform, the need to introduce new syllabi arose out of such concern and was prompted by the general malaise in the area of Irish language pedagogy.

Most of the eighties and nineties were taken up, therefore, with syllabus reform to make the language more accessible and relevant to all students and to lower the rates of failure. The adoption of communicative-type syllabi in both junior and senior cycle programmes was undertaken deliberately by the NCCA (The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) with this background of malaise and with the objectives of accessibility and relevance in mind. But in implementing these important syllabus-related issues, we may have been sidetracked, albeit necessarily so, and have lost sight of the central issue: how learning Irish prepares us for participation in the Irish language speech community

The Irish language speech communities as well as including the territorially defined Gaeltachtaí, refers significantly to a growing number of networks of Irish outside that regional, territorial and ling both at home and abroad. Unlike the Gaeltacht student of Irish may have the support mechanism and neighbourhood domains in sustaining or proficiency through use; the school alone, for the learner of Irish as L2 outside the Gaeltacht, may indeed be the only source of language learning and interlanguage development. Learning Irish in school all too often is not reinforced by participation in, and integration into the speech community. Irish-speaking networks outside Gaeltacht have never been sufficiently numerous to form a readily identifiable and easily visible speech.

4. The distribution of Irish-speaking networks

This distribution of Irish speaking networks pose a serious problem for the learner of Irish, particularly within a communicative framework, where the relevance is wholly identified with societal use. For many schools, there is no readily identifiable speech community where such communication might be meaningful other than in communicational transactions in the Gaeltacht. The communicative-type syllabi now being taught in schools imply that learners who have little or no prospect of eventually integrating into or enacting with the speech community are asked to suspend disbelief and rehearse communicative situations, which can only authentic or valid within the Gaeltacht or in the Irish-speaking networks outside the Gaeltacht.

Efforts in our Irish language classrooms intent on simulating the tourist-type situations so central to communicative pedagogy of more widely- used languages have worn thin with many of our learners. It has been my experience that students have seen through the ruse and that efforts to engage learners' motivation in mimicry of communicative situations, such as booking a hostel in Cork, or asking directions while working from a map of O'Connell St., Dublin, have been doomed to arouse at best a benign indifference, even among our most eager learners

Such an approach is suitable if it is geared towards learners who will want to, or who will have to, or who will choose to use Irish at some stage in their lives in the language speech community in the Gaeltacht. But does Irish language pedagogy prepare learners to integrate into the Irish language speech community outside the Gaeltacht if such were their choice?

It is not always easy to communicate or even to know how and when to communicate with Irish

speakers outside the Gaeltacht. This is often true in the case of adult learners who embark on an adventure of improving their *cúpla focal* (a few words) by attending night classes. Things go well until they try and integrate into a cluster of Irish speakers, then, things go horribly wrong! Learners at this crucial integration-threshold stage often think that their command of the language is not good enough and compare their own efforts unfavourably with the standard of the target network-group. Unfortunately, such learners often give up. This points to a need not only for more research into the sociolinguistic and motivational variables of integration, but also for preliminary studies of interlanguage pragmatics in the case of Irish speakers. (The latter would be to provide data, for example on the nature of illocutionary acts among speakers belonging to the Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht speech communities)

What should we be teaching our students at primary and at post-primary levels? Is the communicative approach out of place, irrelevant and unhelpful for the majority of our learners who will never come into contact with the Gaeltacht speech community?

5. Learning the language without reference to the speech community

Many like Mac Aogáin (1990) would content that the language tasks set within the Irish communicative framework should not always be designed to fit into some vision of an Irish-speaking community outside the school. The thinking here is that the new programme should fit into a model of language involvement that is meaningful for the students within the classroom setting. The CEB (Curriculum and Examination Board) document, which preceded syllabus definition, argued that the classroom itself must be used to motivate learners at least in the short term (CEB 1985:31), by creating a need to use Irish in the accomplishment of meaningful activities, which appeal to their interests and imagination. It states that: 'the classroom is therefore a valid communicative situation, which can in itself be exploited as a valuable resource for learning. To view it merely as a rehearsal studio for the world outside is an approach unlikely to sustain the motivation of many learners of Irish.' This approach, however, has sustained motivation for many of us teachers in the classroom (Ó Laoire 1994). The problem with this model, however is that if school is the only place that Irish is meant to be used then students, when school is out, forget Irish and see it as something irrelevant. Irish like homework, rules and uniform is best forgotten outside school.

6. Educational aims

Irish is an essential part of the Ireland's heritage a significant part of the country's life and identity. It is, therefore, entirely appropriate that the language should constitute an obligatory core subject of the primary and post-primary curricula. It is also clear that the study of Irish as part of the primary or post-primary curriculum espouses general educational aims that are laudable in themselves, (i.e. an essential contribution to the emotional, aesthetic and cognitive development of the individual), independent of reference to learning the language for the utilitarian purposes of communication and for extending and developing bilingualism. Again, apart from the pragmatic dimension of learning language for the purpose of using it in the speech community, the Irish language is singled out in the curriculum as being an important vehicle through which students' cultural and linguistic heritage is mediated. Nonetheless, if we are concerned with extending bilingualism, the idea of learning language for language use in the context of bilingual settings and domains that characterise Ireland sociolinguistically needs to be examined. It is in this context that we look at syllabus definition in Irish as an L2 and re-appraise the syllabus potential to promote additive bilingualism.

7. Syllabus orientation

Here the content of the new common syllabi will be analysed with a view to focusing on the relationship of various targeted levels of communicative competence to potential membership of the Irish language speech community, including the Gaeltacht and the Irish language networks in the English-speaking region.

A committee comprising representatives of teachers' unions, parents, universities, school management representatives, third-level colleges and the Department of Education and Science drafted each syllabus. Ironically, the post-primary syllabus was implemented long before the primary syllabus was designed. The syllabi were developed in accordance with the principles of the FL syllabi with constituent components of:

- Communicative proficiency
- Cultural awareness
- Language awareness
- Literature

The Communicative Proficiency component obviously provides for language learning through purposeful use of language. The Language Awareness section was designed to stimulate pupils' interest in language issues, the history and the sociolinguistics of Irish as well as to provide learners with skills and learning strategies to help them be more effective language learners. The Cultural Awareness section comprising literature texts was designed to ensure that learning activities give learners a feel for those aspects of Irishness and Irish identity mediated through language and literary texts.

7.1. Implementing change

In the absence of any systematic research, it is difficult to assess the impact of the revised syllabus on students' potential to participate in the Irish language speech community. While teachers welcomed the challenge of the new syllabus, they may also have felt that the constraints of a teacher's daily routine would render change difficult. In many ways the changing perception of how learning actually occurs in the classroom shifts responsibility from the teacher to the learners themselves. Knowledge acquisition, rather than being an instructional process, is increasingly being seen as an autonomous construction process which can only be assisted and not enforced by the teacher. I am not altogether sure, however, if teachers understood this new paradigm and took it on board in their teaching.

As a result, the Language Awareness and Cultural Awareness components of the syllabus may not have been really integrated into the classroom activities and the emphasis on learning naturally might well have been hijacked by an over-emphasis on rehearsal for the terminal examination. It should be mentioned that Irish language textbooks often contain an array of examination-type rehearsal questions, rather than focus on tasks that would involve learners focusing on the speech community, the dialects, the difficulties they encounter in learning etc.

It is critically important of course that these praiseworthy areas of content of the syllabus be assessed in the public examinations if they are not to remain in the realms of aspiration. In particular, teachers will wish to know how language and cultural awareness should be assessed

7.2. The syllabus content

What had happened in the case of the syllabus re-orientation for Irish reflects the general contribution of sociolinguistics to language teaching. The contribution of sociolinguistics to language pedagogy has been apparent during the last two decades as the focus of instruction in many L2 + FL programmes has broadened to include communicative competence. Communicative competence has been defined as "what a speaker needs to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community" (Saville-Troike 1989) emerged as a basic tenet in the context of sociolinguistics and was subsequently adopted by syllabus designers and specialists in L2 and FL instruction. Irish language pedagogy, mirroring to a large extent similar developments in the teaching of FL, operates out of a communicative competence paradigm. This has been characterised by moving from an expository style, with a focus on form and grammar to a preparation or rehearsal for language use in the target language speech community, either in the Gaeltacht, or in the networks of Irish language speakers outside it. This has considerable potential to promote and affect bilingualism. Thus within the new L2 curriculum, as well as listening to native and neo-speakers in a variety of interactions, learners' awareness of the language in wide array of societal contexts can be heightened. The learning materials generally deployed reflect the language as the lived experience of the speech community. In textbooks,

students see photographs of Irish signs, listen to TV and radio broadcasts and examine realia, all of which has the important potential of reinforcing and validating the idea of an existing bilingual society.

A second aspect of the new L2 syllabus worthy of mention here is the development of learning materials and textbooks for Irish that sought to present a modern vibrant image of the language in use. Thus, it was not unusual in the early years of communicative language teaching in Ireland to find textbook tasks based on biographies of sport players, music and film stars. These textbooks generally written by practising teachers resembled the general FL textbooks with the general aim of making the language more enjoyable, accessible, enjoyable and interesting. It is also true to say that this approach abandoned a more traditional cultural content in favour of a 'glossy content' used in TEFL and FL approaches. An important point needs to be made here. If one examines the content of the textbook, the context for language 'use' is not immediately apparent. In early textbooks, the context of such language use and practice so crucial to developing communicative tasks and learning materials was clear although sociolinguistically inaccurate and misleading. Here students were invited to suspend disbelief and to engage in rehearsing activities for use in everyday transaction situations all over Ireland e.g. asking for directions in O'Connell St, Dublin's city centre. The contraction of social contexts and domains in which the language is used has narrowed the range of realistic settings exploitable in textbooks. Later textbooks were to adopt a more cautious approach with tasks set up in such a way as to simulate communication with an Irish speaker in a more credible authentic context. Many of the tasks, do not specify the context, with typical tasks being devoid of a context of use.

8. The potential for additive bilingualism examined

To gain some insight into the overall impact of the L2 syllabus on students' perception of their ability to participate and function in the Irish language speech community, preliminary findings of part of a survey on students' general attitudes towards learning Irish are presented here. The survey of students in 23 post-primary schools (N=400), including 100 all-Irish immersion schools in the Kerry, Clare, Limerick and Dublin areas from February to April 2003 adapted the quantitative-instrumentation tools employed by Gardner and Lambert (1972), Deci and Ryan (1985) by Dornyei (2001). For the purposes of this paper, the integrative motivation index was studied. Responses to the following questions were isolated and analysed:

1. Learning Irish is important to me because it will allow me to be more at ease with speakers of Irish.
2. Learning Irish is important to me because it will allow me to meet and speak with speakers of Irish in Irish-speaking contexts and situations.
3. Learning Irish is important for me because it will enable me to understand the arts and literature in the Irish language.
4. Learning Irish is important for me, as it will allow me to take part in Irish cultural activities.

The results indicate that students' experience of learning Irish is geared towards an enhanced participation in the Irish language speech community. The answers along the 5 point Likert scale are collapsed into three categories:

D=Disagree [Strongly Disagree (1)+ Disagree(2)]

DK= Don't Know (3)

A = Agree [Strongly Agree (5) + Agree (4)]

It was hypothesised that students in immersion programmes would exhibit reasonably high integrative orientation towards the speech community and this hypothesis was borne out in the results.

Category= Immersion Schools/Programmes (Gaelcholáistí: All-Irish medium)				
N=100				
	Q 1.	Q 2.	Q 3.	Q 4.
D	8	16	16	12
DK	16	8	12	16
A	76	76	72	72

Table 1: All-Irish Immersion Schools

The same analysis was applied to Irish as L2 students' responses, with a view to determining students' perceptions of their willingness to participate in the Irish language speech community.

CATEGORY= IRISH AS L2				
N=300				
	Q 1.	Q 2.	Q 3.	Q 4.
D	16	13	13	26
DK	16	14	14	14
A	68	73	73	60

Table 2: Irish as an L2 in mainstream schools

It was surprising and unexpected here to get a relatively high orientation index. 68% of students studying Irish as an L2 felt that it was important to learn the language to be at ease with Irish speakers with a higher index in the case where learners specified that learning Irish would allow them proactively to meet and speak with Irish speakers. There is a less high index in the case of question 4 where learners 60% of learners perceived learning the language as a means of integration in cultural activities. It needs to be pointed out of course that many 'Irish defined' cultural activities such as games, music, tend to be conducted largely through the medium of English; so it may well be the case, indeed that this had a bearing on the result here. The responses will have to be analysed further before any definite claims can be made, but they tend to support the view that the syllabus does have the potential of creating an awareness of the speech community among learners as well as the important aspiration towards participation.

9. Conclusion

A problem in Irish language pedagogy in the past was the tendency for syllabus definition and language revival policies towards advancing bilingualism to occur more or less independently of one another. To re-align Irish language pedagogy policies, with the organizing principle for syllabus definition is to be more answerable to how, where and in what context the language is used in the Irish language speech community. Irish language pedagogy needs through creative implementation of the Language Awareness and Cultural Awareness components of the syllabus to create a greater empowering

awareness of the context and the process of language use in the speech community to achieve meaningful and purposeful language learning.

References

- CEB (The Curriculum and Examinations Board) (1985) *Language in the Curriculum*. Dublin: The Curriculum and Examinations Board.
- Coady, Maria, Ó Laoire Muiris (2002) Mismatches in language policy and practice in education: The case of Gaelscoileanna in the Republic of Ireland. *Language Policy* 1, Kluwer Academic Publishers. 143-158.
- Cummins, Jim (1977) A comparison of reading skills in Irish and English medium schools in Greaney, Vincent (ed) *Studies in Reading*. Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland 128-134.
- Cummins, Jim (1978) Immersion programmes: The Irish experience. *International Review of Education* 24. 273-282.
- Deci, E.L., Ryan, R.M. (1985) *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán (2001) *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Harlow: Longman.
- Gardner, R.C., Lambert, W.E. (1972) *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Harris, John, Murtagh, Lelia (1999) *Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School*. Dublin: ITÉ.
- Mac Aogáin, Eoghan (1990) *Teaching Irish in the Schools: Towards a Policy for 1992*. Dublin: ITÉ.
- Ó Dubhthaigh, Fiachra (1978). Múineadh na Gaeilge san Iar-bhunscóil. *Léachtaí Cholm Chille* IX, 19-43.
- Ó Laoire, Muiris 1994. Spleácadh ar mhúineadh na Gaeilge san iar-bhunscóil. *Teangeolas* 33, 33-39.
- Ó Laoire Muiris. (1997. Gearáin agus Caighdeáin. *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad* 1996-'97, 204-225.
- Saville-Troike, Muriel (1989) *The Ethnography of Communication*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism

edited by James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister,
Kellie Rolstad, and Jeff MacSwan

Cascadilla Press Somerville, MA 2005

Copyright information

ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism
© 2005 Cascadilla Press, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-210-8 CD-ROM
ISBN 978-1-57473-107-1 library binding (5-volume set)

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Press.

Ordering information

To order a copy of the proceedings, contact:

Cascadilla Press
P.O. Box 440355
Somerville, MA 02144, USA

phone: 1-617-776-2370
fax: 1-617-776-2271
sales@cascadilla.com
www.cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This paper is available from www.cascadilla.com/isb4.html and is identical to the version published by Cascadilla Press on CD-ROM and in library binding.