

The Role of Ordinary Primary Schools in the Maintenance and Revival of Irish

John Harris

University of Dublin Trinity College

1. Background

The 1937 Constitution of Ireland gave official recognition to both Irish and English but designated Irish, a minority language, as the first official language. Only about 5% of those people who live in the mainly English-language areas of the country speak Irish frequently either at home or at work, though another 10% or so speak or read Irish regularly. Larger percentages report occasional use of Irish, most often passive use such as listening to or watching Irish-language radio and television programmes (Ó Riagáin, 2001; Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994; Ó Riagáin & Harris, 1993). In the relatively small Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) areas, mainly along the west coast, about 43% of people speak Irish on a daily basis according to 1996 census data (Ó Riagáin, 2001). In the mainly English-language areas, where about 98% of the population of the republic reside, natural intergenerational transmission of Irish is at a low level, and here the educational system plays an extremely important role in transmitting the language. Not surprisingly, survey data show that high levels of proficiency in Irish are associated with high levels of education and that use of the language is most intense during the school years. Recent census data show, for example, that while 10% of the population report using Irish on a daily basis, the proportion is much higher for the school going population (27% to 36%) than it is for those aged over 20 years (about 3%). The proportion of the population over the age of three years who are reported as being able to speak Irish has increased consistently during the 20th century, from 18.3% in 1926, shortly after the foundation of the state, to 43.5% in 1996.

All children in the Republic of Ireland, irrespective of whether they speak Irish or English at home, study both Irish and English as subjects throughout their primary and post-primary careers. In the great majority of 'ordinary' schools (i.e. those schools which are neither Gaeltacht schools or immersion 'all-Irish' schools), the medium of instruction for all other subjects is English. Exposure to Irish at primary level is probably both more intense, and more focused on speech and conversation, than it is at post-primary level. At post-primary, the language tends to be restricted to the Irish lesson proper, in part because teachers at this level are subject specialists - in contrast to the position at primary level where every teacher is an Irish teacher. Thus, the informal use of Irish for school and class communication outside the Irish lesson proper, and the teaching of one or two school subjects (apart from Irish) partly or wholly through Irish, are more common at primary than at post-primary (Ó Riagáin & Harris, 1993).

All this suggests that primary schools have a particularly important role in reproducing competence in Irish, especially speaking proficiency, in each new generation and in maintaining the levels of bilingualism reported in the census in recent times. Both from sociolinguistic and educational perspectives, then, it is important to know how successful is the teaching and learning of Irish in primary school. In addition, because of the critical importance of *ordinary* primary schools in the reproduction of competence in Irish in each new generation, what might in other sociolinguistic situations be seen as relatively routine matters of syllabus and teaching acquire in the Irish context a unique and critical urgency.

In the present paper we sketch some of the main findings of our research in Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann on Irish in ordinary primary schools and try to indicate some of the important lessons we have learned from it. One of the points I would like to illustrate with our data is that monitoring and evaluation exercises, in order to be effective, must acknowledge the full complexity of the phenomenon being studied. In a sociolinguistic context where success in teaching Irish at primary

level has important consequences for the success of the national effort to maintain and revive Irish, evaluation must be sensitive to the full range of contextual factors outside the school, as well as to the interactional factors inside the classroom, which together determine success in developing proficiency in Irish. Otherwise, such monitoring and evaluation is unlikely to be enlightening and helpful in relation to policy, planning and action. Second, I will try to show, by referring to some of our own work in ITÉ, that innovation in language teaching, materials and programmes is likely to be most effective when motivated by the findings of research and evaluation. And third, I will try to illustrate in the case of Irish in ordinary schools how the quality and sophistication of the policy response to the findings of evaluation studies must be equal to the scale and range of difficulties uncovered.

2. Irish in the primary school system since 1922.

The present position of Irish in primary schools can be seen as considerably better than that which existed before independence in 1922 but somewhat worse than that which existed in the early 1940's, when state activity in favour of Irish in the educational system seems to have reached a peak (Ó Buachalla, 1984; Harris and Murtagh, 1988a). Prior to 1922, Irish was taught in no more than one quarter of all primary schools. But from early on the new state began to pursue a policy which had as its ultimate aim the implementation of a bilingual if not a full immersion programme in all primary schools. There were considerable practical difficulties in realising this objective quickly, of course, since the relatively weak position of Irish in the educational system prior to independence meant that many teachers and children had a poor knowledge of the language. The vigour with which the new policy on Irish was implemented can be judged from the fact that within 20 years, 12% of primary schools were teaching entirely through Irish, 43% were teaching at least some classes entirely through Irish (most often infant classes), while the remainder were teaching Irish as a single school subject.

Since then, it has been argued, there was a slow but steady decline in the position of Irish in primary schools until the 1970's.. By 1980-1981, for example, only 5% of schools were teaching entirely through Irish, 1% were teaching some classes through Irish while the remainder were teaching Irish as a subject (Ireland: Department of Education, 1983; Harris and Murtagh, 1988). These latter data however, do not take account of the substantial minority of individual classes within schools which are taught one or two subjects such as music or physical education through Irish. It must also be noted that there has been a rapid expansion, albeit from a relatively low base, in the number of all-Irish primary schools outside Gaeltacht areas in the intervening 20 years or so. Currently, there are 119 all-Irish schools outside Gaeltacht areas.

3. Research on Irish in primary schools in the 1970's and 1980's

We turn now to an overview of research on achievement in Irish at primary level. Three issues are examined: the extent to which curricular objectives in spoken Irish are attained; how standards have changed in the last few decades; and some of the social, educational and other factors which affect achievement.

3.1 Achievement of curricular objectives in Irish at primary level

National surveys conducted by ITÉ in the late 1970's and 1980's showed that an average of about one-third of pupils in ordinary schools attained mastery of each of the curricular objectives in spoken Irish at sixth, fourth and second grade. The tests were of the criterion-referenced kind and were based on the *Nuachúrsaí*, the official Department of Education conversation courses in Irish for primary schools. Another one-third of pupils, on average, made at least minimal progress in relation to each of the objectives at each grade, but did not attain mastery. And one-third of pupils, on average, failed to make even minimal progress in relation to each of the objectives at each grade (Harris, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1988; Harris and Murtagh, 1988a,b). The fact that the various proportions remained reasonably stable as the objectives become more demanding at successive grades suggests that proficiency in

spoken Irish grows steadily during the primary school years. The proportions failing to attain mastery or to make even minimal progress in relation to objectives at each grade, however, indicate the existence of a substantial gap between the level of performance in spoken Irish which the curriculum implicitly aimed at that time and the actual level of performance which was attained by most pupils.

Changes in standards of attainment in Irish

The second main issue concerns changes in standards of attainment. Research conducted in the 1970's and early 1980's indicated that standards of achievement in Irish were generally holding up well in the junior grades of primary school but were declining in the senior grades and at post primary. The findings were based on data relating to teachers' perceptions, scores on standardised reading-tests and public-examination grades (Ó Domhnaill and Ó Gliasáin, 1976; Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), 1976; Fontes and Kellaghan, 1977; Greaney, 1978; Ó Riagáin, 1982; Bord na Gaeilge, 1986). A comparison between the results of ITÉ national surveys of achievement in spoken Irish, again based on objective criterion-referenced tests conducted in 1978 and 1985, revealed a modest but statistically significant increase in the mean percentage of pupils attaining mastery of each of the sixth-grade objectives over the seven year period (Harris and Murtagh, 1988a).

Finally, a major new national survey of achievement in Irish at sixth-grade level carried out in 2002 will allow us to say whether overall standards of achievement in spoken Irish at sixth-grade level have changed in the period since 1985. In order to ensure the comparability of the surveys, the ITÉ tests of speaking and listening used in the earlier surveys have been carefully revised to take account of social and other changes in the meantime while making the minimum possible changes to the language content of the tests themselves. The new survey covers ordinary schools, all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools and is being jointly carried out by ITÉ and the Educational Research Centre (ERC) in St. Patrick's College, Dublin at the request of the Department of Education and Science. Because of the interval which has elapsed since the original ITÉ surveys in the 1980's, and the range and quality of the additional contextual information now being collected, the results of this new survey are potentially interesting.

3.2. *General ability, social class and achievement in Irish*

The third issue is the influence of various factors on pupil achievement in Irish and attitude to Irish. We begin with general academic ability and social class and then proceed to a number of other factors, including gender, regional/urban-rural location, size of sixth-grade group in class, home language and amount of Irish-medium instruction at school.

There is substantial evidence from Ireland and elsewhere (Genesee, 1976; Carroll, 1979) of a strong link between pupils' general academic ability and second-language achievement generally. A number of studies conducted in Irish primary schools show significant positive associations between general academic ability, as measured by a test of verbal reasoning in English, and achievement in both Irish reading (Martin and Kellaghan, 1977; Fontes, Kellaghan and O'Brien, 1981) and spoken Irish (Harris and Murtagh, 1988b). Verbal reasoning has also been found to correlate strongly with success in Irish in public examinations at post-primary level (Greaney and Kellaghan, 1984).

Various national and international studies have also indicated that social-class background is positively linked to general educational outcomes, including second-language achievement and attitude (Hannan, Breen *et al.*, 1983; Skehan, 1990). In interpreting such findings, it should be borne in mind that social class tends to be primarily defined, as it is in the present study, in terms of parents' occupation. It has been argued, however, that the really critical factors in determining success in school life are 'cultural capital' indices such as parental values, attitudes, tastes, beliefs and linguistic practices (Bourdieu, 1974, 1977; Lynch, 1985). The *Twenty Classes Study* described below tried to identify some of these home factors in the case of Irish. National surveys of Irish ability and use of Irish among the adult population have also identified significant positive associations between social class and both ability to speak Irish and attitude to Irish (CLAR, 1975; Ó Riagáin, 1997).

3.3 *Demographic, educational and other factors.*

We turn now from general academic ability and social class to the other factors which have been linked to achievement generally and to Irish in particular. First, research on gender differences in second-language achievement indicates that girls, by and large, do better than boys as far as both verbal skills generally and second-language achievement are concerned (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Burstall, 1975). In the case of Irish, tests of reading confirm the superior performance of girls over boys (Martin and Kellaghan, 1977). The ITÉ surveys of spoken Irish (Harris, 1984; Harris and Murtagh, 1988a) consistently show that more girls than boys attain mastery of grade-related objectives in spoken Irish. Published examination statistics for the three years 1992-1994 also show that girls regularly outperform boys in Irish in both the junior and Leaving Certificate examinations (Department of Education, 1993, 1994, 1995). More girls than boys opt for higher level papers, more girls receive honours and fewer girls fail.

Regional/locational factors have also been found to influence achievement. In the 1978 sixth-grade survey of spoken Irish, Harris (1983) reported that classes in the Dublin region and in city locations generally had significantly lower levels of achievement in Irish than classes in other regions/locations - classes in Munster were best overall. In addition, smaller sixth-grade classes were associated with significantly higher levels of achievement in Irish.

Home use of Irish is also an important factor. A national survey on languages in Ireland in 1994 reported that Irish was never spoken in over two-thirds of Irish homes (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliaáin, 1994). While the opportunities for children outside the Gaeltacht to use Irish at home are fairly limited, therefore, various ITÉ surveys of schools have nevertheless confirmed the positive effects of even moderate home use of Irish on pupil achievement in the language (Harris, 1984; Harris and Murtagh, 1988a,b).

Finally, there is evidence that target-language use outside the language lesson proper can positively influence proficiency. Quite aside from the high levels of achievement found in all-Irish primary schools (Harris, 1984; Harris and Murtagh, 1988a), there is also evidence that at least some Irish-medium instruction in ordinary schools leads to higher levels of achievement than is found in schools/classes where it is not used at all. In the 1978 ITÉ sixth-grade survey, Irish-medium instruction in ordinary schools emerged as a strong predictor of achievement in spoken Irish (Harris, 1983). Similar results were found in the 1985 sixth-grade replication study: the overall mean percentage attaining mastery of sixth-grade objectives was substantially different depending on the amount of Irish-medium instruction received: no Irish-medium instruction (30.4%, on average, mastered each objective); less than one-hour of Irish-medium instruction per week (36.1%, on average, mastered each objective); one hour or more such instruction (48.7%, on average, mastered each objective) (Harris and Murtagh, 1988b).

4. More recent developments and research on Irish in primary schools

While the kind of national surveys of achievement conducted by ITÉ which we discussed above, as well as other work such as the major INTO survey of teachers' perceptions of the teaching of Irish in 1984 (INTO, 1985) were very informative, many questions about the teaching and learning of Irish had hardly been researched at all. The role of parental attitudes, pupil attitudes and interests, and many other factors in determining success and failure in learning to speak Irish, had yet to be studied. Most importantly, we had little objective information on exactly how Irish was taught - our information was limited to anecdote and individual case studies. New national surveys would not be an appropriate or effective way to obtain this kind of information, however, because they require the sampling and testing of large numbers of pupils. National studies cannot be used to collect detailed process-type information on teaching and learning because the burden that this would place on school time and resources would be unacceptable. In addition, the volume of data-analysis and interpretation involved would be prohibitive. Nevertheless, the need to collect data and information which would provide a richer picture of the teaching and learning of Irish became more urgent towards the end of the 1980's as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment began consultation and planning relating to a revision of the whole primary school curriculum, including Irish.

4.1 The Twenty-Classes Study

The *Twenty-Classes Study*, which I carried out with my ITÉ colleague, Lelia Murtagh, was designed to overcome some of these problems by confining itself to a detailed examination of a small number of contrasting schools/classes. Full details of the study can be found in Harris and Murtagh (1999) on which the present brief account is based. The field work was carried out by Primary School Inspectors of the Department of Education and Science. The study had two main aims:

(a) to describe the range of conditions under which spoken Irish is taught and learned at sixth-class level by studying a small number of diverse classes which were nevertheless representative nationally

(b) to describe the teaching and learning of Irish in this small group of classes in more detail, and from a greater number of different perspectives than had ever been done hitherto.

Our intention was that the data collected would be a resource for anyone concerned with the range of social, educational and linguistic conditions under which Irish is taught at primary level. Thus, it might be useful, for example, to those engaged in the development of courses and syllabuses in Irish, in the assembly of information packages for parents and so on. As it turned out, I subsequently made exactly this kind of use of the data when, working with three other colleagues, Pádraig Ó Néill and Máire Uí Dhufaigh of ITÉ, and Dr. Eoghan Ó Súilleabháin of the Department of Education and Science, we carried out the *Communicative Materials Project*. This project was funded by the Department of Education and Science at the request of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The *Communicative Materials Project* is described later.

Carrying out the *Twenty-Classes Study* involved the development of a number of new instruments and classroom observation procedures. One of these instruments provides a measure of different aspects of pupils' attitudes to Irish and their interest in learning Irish and foreign languages. Another questionnaire investigated parents' attitudes to Irish and the school, and parents' own practices in relation to such matters as praising their child's achievement in Irish and helping with Irish homework. In addition, we asked the class teacher to make his or her own assessment of each pupil's ability in Irish, interest in Irish, and experience of difficulty with Irish. We also, of course, tested each pupil's proficiency in Irish, listening and speaking, using the ITÉ criterion-referenced tests described earlier.

Particularly significant were two new classroom-observation instruments designed to allow primary school inspectors, with the teacher's agreement, to record the activities, materials and dynamics of typical Irish language lessons at sixth-grade. Written instructions were given to the inspectors/observers concerning the general procedure to be followed in each classroom. Two observers worked side by side, but independently, in each classroom. Observer 1 was guided in his or her observation by the *Irish Lesson Analysis System (ILAS)* (Harris and Murtagh, 1999). Central to *ILAS* is the notion of a lesson segment - 'naturalistic' teaching units or events. In *ILAS*, segments are defined in terms of five main dimensions of analysis: *Topic*, *Language activity*, *Pupil behaviour*, *Teacher mode of involvement* and *Classroom organisation*. For each of these five dimensions, there is a set of descriptive categories. In the case of *Language activity*, for example, there are categories such as 'Translation', 'Imitation', 'Drills', 'Real communication in Irish' and 'Simulated communication in Irish'. The inspector also systematically recorded changes in class interest and class attention as the various parts of the lesson unfolded. Observer 2 used another ITÉ classroom observation instrument to classify the general behaviour, participation and language use of three pre-selected pupils. An audio-tape recording was made of each lesson so that it could be re-examined later to obtain additional information and, if necessary, to correct some of the codings. This 'process' type information on the teaching of Irish was entirely new.

Our ultimate goal in collecting all this information was to see if we could explain variations from pupil to pupil and from class to class in achievement in Irish by relating them to the range of data we had collected on teaching, pupils and parents. Information gathered by our various research instruments was also related to a number of background variables such as social class (a variable which had not previously been studied in relation to spoken Irish at primary level), pupil general academic ability, gender, the urban/rural location of the school and size of sixth-grade group. We will not discuss here the variety of correlation and regression analyses used to investigate all these questions but a full account can be found in Harris and Murtagh (1999).

In order to make the study more useful, we ‘calibrated’, as it were, the Irish achievement of the 20 sixth-grade classes in terms of the achievement of classes nationally (Harris and Murtagh, 1988a). Thus, when we examined data on such variables as pupil attitudes, levels of interest or teaching activities in each of the 20 classes, we were able to interpret these data in terms of how good or bad the Irish achievement of each class is compared to classes nationally. Implicitly, our goal throughout was to predict the achievement in spoken Irish of the twenty classes, by showing how variables combine to determine the level of success achieved in each class. This meant trying to show the manner in which favourable social, educational or attitudinal factors came together to produce a high level of achievement in spoken Irish in some classes, while corresponding unfavourable circumstances in others produced low levels of achievement.

Before we outline these findings it should be emphasised that the Twenty Classes Study was carried out before the revised curriculum in Irish was introduced. Indeed these findings and others from the Communicative Materials Project described later would have been taken into account by the Irish Curriculum Committee of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

4.2. *Pupil attitude/motivation*

The study showed that pupils were reasonably well disposed towards the Irish language itself and towards the idea of integrating with the Irish-language-speaking ‘group’. But motivation, or actual commitment to learning Irish, is less positive. Pupils with better motivation and attitudes are more successful in learning Irish.

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.

Pupils tend 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 anxious about speaking Irish in class.

4.3. *Pupils’ reactions to the Irish lessons and courses in their own words*

Pupils experience the Irish lesson and materials as boring, old-fashioned and repetitious. They would like lessons and courses which are more modern, more fun and more realistic and which place a greater emphasis on conversations and games.

Pupils and classes with low levels of achievement in Irish often complain of difficulty in understanding the lesson or the teacher and express general apathy and discouragement about learning Irish.

4.4. *Parents’ views and practices*

Parents are generally positive about Irish and supportive of the notion of their children being taught the language in school. In practice, however, many parents have a lukewarm, hands-off attitude to the actual *enterprise* of their children learning Irish. For example, a majority of parents do not directly promote positive attitudes to learning Irish; they are much less likely to praise their child’s achievements in Irish than they are to praise other subjects; and they are less likely to help with homework in Irish than in other subjects.

A quarter of parents know nothing about how Irish is taught while another half know ‘a little’. Parents generally are happy with the efforts of the local school in relation to Irish.

4.5. *Direct observation of the teaching of Irish by inspectors*

The study validates the general orientation to teaching Irish which is proposed in the revised curriculum - the communicative approach. It does this by showing that classes in which a greater emphasis is placed on communication do better 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, generally negative outcomes are associated with traditional language-practice (non-communicative) activities such as ‘Drills’ or repetition-based activities.

Classes in which pupils spend a lot of time on routine (language-practice type) 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.

4.6. *Pupil participation in the Irish class*

Observation of *individual* pupils in each class by inspectors showed that about half of all pupil ‘behaviours’ during the Irish lesson consisted of the pupil speaking individually - and in Irish in 91% of cases. The results also showed that (i) pupil speech is not produced very often in the context of real communication or of meaning 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 which emphasise communicative teaching activities.

5. Innovation in teaching Irish based on research and evaluation

I will now turn to the second main issue set out at the beginning: that innovation and improvement in language teaching, materials and programmes is most effective when motivated by the findings of research and evaluation. I will illustrate this point by reference to two ITÉ development projects which I directed in the second half of the 1990’s. Both projects grew out of, and were guided by, earlier ITÉ national monitoring surveys as well as the *Twenty Classes Study*. These development projects became known as the *Communicative Materials Project* and the *Teaching through Irish Project*.

5.1. *The Communicative Materials Project*

The *Communicative Materials Project* was carried out by ITÉ in close cooperation with the Irish Curriculum Committee of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Harris *et al.*, 1996a,b). The goal was to produce guidelines and sample materials for a primary-school programme which would adopt a broadly communicative approach. We were conscious of the need for this exploratory work, knowing that a long period of experimentation and debate had also preceded the adoption of a communicative approach to modern languages and to Irish at post-primary (e.g. ITÉ, 1980). There had been no really large-scale, systematic attempt prior to this to investigate the relevance of the new ideas about communicative teaching to Irish at primary level.

Apart from introducing a new emphasis on communication in teaching and learning Irish, the *Communicative Materials Project* also attempted to find solutions to the range of problems identified in the *Twenty-Class Study*. Among the problems in question - though not necessarily present in all classes or schools - were low levels of class attention and class interest, pupils’ difficulty in understanding the lesson, pupils’ reluctance to speak in class, pupils’ lack of confidence in their own ability to succeed at Irish and lack of active support from parents.

The *Communicative Materials Project* involved over 60 teachers from *Galltacht* (English speaking areas) and *Gaeltacht* schools. *Galltacht* and *Gaeltacht* teachers met separately with the ITÉ Working Group. The account here focuses only on ordinary *Galltacht* schools. In the initial meeting with teachers, the basic principles of the communicative approach to second-language teaching were outlined. The contrast between communication /meaning-negotiation and language practice was explained (see Harris and Murtagh, 1999, Chapter 6). The emphasis was to be on using Irish in the classroom in ways which simulated the ‘naturalness’ of first-language acquisition and which maximised opportunities for ‘life-like’ rehearsal of the language (Mitchell, 1994). Teachers were given a draft unit appropriate to their particular grade(s) and they discussed it in small groups along with one or more members of the ITÉ Working Group. A few weeks were then set aside for testing out the prepared unit

in the classroom. During this time teachers completed a simple questionnaire on each lesson, recording progress and difficulties in using the materials.

Although communication and meaning negotiation were paramount, an emphasis on form was still maintained. This secondary goal was realised by first drawing pupils' attention to the relevant grammatical forms in the context of a communicative activity. This was then followed up by activities which involved more formal analysis and practice of the target structure. Language structures were not practised in a formal manner, however, until their communicative significance had already been illustrated. We made no attempt to replace the existing language-practice activities of teachers but simply asked them to integrate the new materials and ideas with their own approach as they saw fit. Neither did we dissuade teachers from using their existing reading schemes, though we did add some communicative reading tasks.

Lessons mainly consisted of communicative activities incorporating the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Where possible, authentic materials in the form of texts, street signs, notices, menus, application forms etc. were used. Authentic materials related to our cultural and literary heritage, such as songs, poems and place names, were also used. In the junior grades, the emphasis was on listening activities in which real messages in Irish had to be understood and responded to. Versions of stories at two levels of difficulty, some of them on audio tape, were made available to accommodate classes of varying ability in Irish.

A central goal was to promote a positive attitude to learning Irish and to make the learning process itself more enjoyable and interesting. Communicative games and tasks, in which the pupil must use simple Irish in a purposeful way in order to participate effectively, feature strongly in the materials. In some games, different pupils or groups of pupils have different pieces of simple information, and they have to communicate with each other in Irish in order to combine the information necessary to succeed in the game. Social-interaction-based activities (e.g. role-play, sketches and drama) also play a major part, as does the acquisition of real new information or skills - e.g. learning Irish dances such as *Ballad Luimnigh* through Irish. Everywhere in the materials, the pupils' own lives are to the fore and there is a sustained effort to ensure that the situations, characters and, as far as possible, speech and communication styles are consistent with pupils' interests and daily experience. This latter aspect of the work was the one that required the most thought. Substantial investment and research will continue to be needed in the years ahead if courses and materials in Irish which are realistic and which appeal to pupils are to be produced. The final report on the *Communicative Materials Project* makes the point that creative writers and other artists have a considerable contribution to make in this area.

Another problem was how to develop lessons and materials which would stimulate and engage those pupils with low levels of achievement in Irish, while providing some challenge for those with a better command of Irish. To ensure that this problem would be confronted head-on, teachers from a wide range of schools, including those in disadvantaged areas, were invited to participate in the project. Given the poor attitude/motivation results for pupils with low levels of ability in Irish which was revealed in the *Twenty Classes Study*, we set out to provide experiences which we hoped would allow all pupils to say 'I'm good at Irish' or 'I can speak Irish'. This aspect of the project was an unqualified success - a frequent remark made by teachers who used the materials was that even those children who were very weak at Irish were, for the first time, actually requesting that the Irish class begin.

We also encouraged teachers to find ways of defining and explicitly marking pupils' progress as they gradually develop communicative proficiency in Irish. To this end, a communicative objective was set out at the beginning of each of the lessons supplied to the teachers. Finally, we tried to provide for more able pupils and classes in a systematic way. For example, a feature of all units was the inclusion of *Dúshláin Bhreise* so called because of the added challenge which these optional activities posed.

Teachers were exhorted not to correct pupils' errors during communicative activities but to do it later. Pupils were to be encouraged in every way to use whatever Irish they had at their disposal in order to understand or transmit messages. This meant learning to tolerate uncertainty and to take risks in situations where communicative difficulties were encountered. Pupils, in other words, were to be helped to develop 'strategic competence'. More generally, the teacher was urged to cultivate a tolerant, supportive, affirmative atmosphere in class which would promote a high level of pupil participation and personal expression.

The final versions of the sample units were published in two reports (Harris *et al.*, 1996a,b). An audio tape containing material for various lessons accompanied each report. Substantial numbers of sample lessons were provided at each grade level e.g. a total of over 130 lessons are included for grades 3-6. The reports also included guidelines for implementing a communicative approach to teaching Irish as well as detailed specifications for the production and format of courses and teaching materials following the introduction of the new curriculum. They also deal with issues such as the importance of using children on audio and video tapes, and of employing native speakers of Irish - though not necessarily always from Gaeltacht areas - to record lesson material. It was never intended that these reports would constitute anything like a definitive statement on a communicative approach to Irish at primary level, but that they would serve as a contribution to ongoing debate and development. There has been a considerable demand from teachers for these reports during the period that the inservice for the revised curriculum has been in progress.

5.2. *The ITÉ teaching through Irish project*

I initiated this project with my ITÉ colleague, Seán Mac Giollaibhuí, just as the *Communicative Materials Project* was being completed. Perhaps it should be made clear straight away that we did not undertake it with the expectation that anything other than a small minority of teachers in ordinary schools would initially be interested in teaching entire school subjects through Irish. We felt, however, that it was important to begin this work and we believed that it could contribute to the development of Irish-language teaching in a number of significant ways as the revised curriculum was introduced. Earlier research by ITÉ has shown that pupils in ordinary schools who are taught some aspects of the curriculum (apart from Irish) through Irish have substantially higher levels of achievement in spoken Irish than other pupils (Harris, 1983). More importantly, pupils of all levels of academic ability, as measured by an English-language verbal-reasoning test, have higher levels of achievement in Irish if they are in classes which are exposed to some Irish-medium teaching (Harris, 1993; Harris and Murtagh, 1988b). The Department of Education and Science had a policy for many years also of generally encouraging this approach. Despite this official policy, materials in Irish, specifically geared to the linguistic needs of pupils in *ordinary schools*, and to the requirements of teachers who were embarking on Irish-medium teaching for the first time, had never been made available.

The project involved us working regularly with 50 third- and fourth-grade teachers over a two-year period to develop full courses in Science and Art through the medium of Irish. The teachers came from a wide variety of ordinary schools, including those in disadvantaged areas. The vast majority of them had no previous experience in teaching through Irish. Separate groups of teachers in Dublin and Tullamore met us in workshop sessions where we explained and discussed our proposals and distributed sample lessons. Having tried out the materials in their own classrooms, the teachers returned and discussed progress and completed questionnaires concerning the lessons. The lessons were then revised on the basis of this information. The teachers found the approach both enjoyable and rewarding and the courses, 'Bain Triail As' and 'Lean den Ealaín' (Harris and Mac Giollaibhuí, 1998), are now on general sale.

None of the lesson material consisted of translations or adaptations of existing courses in English. Instead, every aspect of each lesson was planned and developed with the particular needs of pupils and teachers in ordinary schools in mind. We choose Art because so many of the activities appropriate to the subject at this level involve language use which is located in a practical, concrete context. Science was chosen as the other subject in the knowledge that it would make greater demands on pupils in terms of vocabulary and perhaps use of language. In addition, while it was intended at the time that science would be introduced as a subject for the first time in the revised primary curriculum, that curriculum had not yet appeared at the time the project was carried out. Thus, we expected that pupils would have a high level of interest in this subject since they had not been taught it before. The teachers themselves also would not have taught science before – even through the medium of English. Thus, it was possible for both teachers and pupils to make an entirely fresh start on this subject through the medium of Irish.

The teacher's material for each lesson was in three parts. The first consisted of background material including (i) a statement of the objective of the lesson, (ii) materials required, (iii) a list of the main vocabulary items involved (Irish and English), and (iv) a list of informal phrases or idioms that might be useful to the teacher during the lesson. The pupil's material in the case of Science also includes a pictorial vocabulary in Irish at the beginning of each lesson.

The second part of the teacher's material consisted of an outline of the main steps in the lesson, usually illustrated, including a full script for the teacher. The aim was to anticipate some of the difficulties which would be presented by the limited linguistic ability of pupils, and to suggest possible ways around these difficulties. The availability of the prepared material had the effect of freeing teachers from some of the minute-by-minute decisions about the lesson to be taught, thus allowing them to attend more fully to classroom dynamics. In particular, they could devote more of their creative energy to responding to the individual needs of pupils who were learning through Irish for the first time. We expected and encouraged teachers to depart from the script and we know that they actually did. Nevertheless, there was general agreement that having the lesson planned in advance in this way was a major factor in the success of the project. The third part of the prepared material consisted of an optional development of the basic theme for more able classes.

The initial guidelines to teachers made it clear that the materials provided could be used in any way that the teacher saw fit, but we suggested, after some general discussion, a number of principles that might be followed. We proposed, for example, that in the beginning teachers would accept questions from pupils in English but answer them in simple Irish. In the longer term, teachers might rephrase in Irish the questions which had been posed in English by pupils. Discussions in English between pupils should also be permitted initially, but pupils should gradually be encouraged to use Irish. It was agreed that, particularly in the light of the results of the *Twenty Classes Study*, pupil understanding and enjoyment of the subject were paramount considerations.

We believe that the provision of materials which are specifically designed for teaching pupils in ordinary schools through Irish is important in a number of ways. First, it is clear from the ITÉ surveys conducted in the 1970's and 1980's, as well as from the *Twenty-Class Study*, that a limited programme of Irish-medium instruction is an essential ingredient in the success of those classes in ordinary schools which have really high levels of achievement in Irish - in some classes stretching all the way up to the mean level of performance attained in all-Irish schools (Harris and Murtagh, 1999). Even though the percentage of such schools nationally may be small, they make a significant contribution to the overall performance of ordinary schools in relation to Irish. Providing high-quality, specifically-designed Irish-medium materials also helps to maintain this traditional diversity in the ordinary primary schools' programme. The proven and widely acknowledged success of all-Irish schools in teaching through Irish, should not have the unintended effect over time of creating an expectation that ordinary schools are homogeneously 'Irish-as-a-subject-only' in character.

There is perhaps a slightly greater danger of that happening as we adopt a communicative approach to teaching Irish. Communicative language teaching originated in foreign languages at post-primary, where the tradition of teaching parts or all of other subjects through the target language has never become really established. Thus, while we have much to learn from that valuable foreign-language teaching experience, we must also recognise that that tradition has tended to locate communication in the target language within the core lesson. It would be ironic, of course, if the element of the primary-school programme which traditionally involved the most truly communicative use of Irish were to fall into disuse as a 'more communicative' core programme came into being.

Admittedly, content-based teaching has grown in recent years as an adjunct to, and as a development of, communicative language teaching. Content-based teaching involves working out from the core subject, incorporating elements of other subjects into the teaching of the target language. This is a very desirable strategy and indeed we adopted it to a significant extent in the *Communicative Materials Project*. But we believe that the bolder approach of attempting to teach a whole subject, such as Science or Art, through Irish has distinct advantages. The more radical approach obliges us to investigate the whole range of mechanisms by which sometimes complex information can be transmitted using relatively limited linguistic resources. It also identifies a broader range of topics suitable for integration with the core Irish lesson, topics which would almost certainly not come to light with a more piecemeal approach. In any case, one way of using the new materials would be for

teachers to select certain *elements* of these Irish-medium lessons for inclusion in a conventional communicative approach - e.g. ‘*ag déanamh cárta na Nollag*’ in the case of Art or ‘*ag úsáid uisce*’ in the case of Science. Such elements could be readily integrated into the regular Irish lesson because the prepared materials have been specifically designed to accommodate the linguistic capabilities of pupils in ordinary schools. On the basis of that potential alone, a case can be made for repeating the *Teaching through Irish* experiment with other school subjects.

6. An adequate policy response to the findings of evaluation

In this final section, I would like to argue that the quality and sophistication of the policy response to the findings of evaluation studies on Irish in ordinary schools must be equal to the scale and range of difficulties which research has identified. I will be concerned with the kind of policy response needed rather than with trying to define precisely the institutions and structures which might be required to implement that policy. These matters are discussed in more detail in Harris and Murtagh (1999).

The first thing to be considered is the scale and importance of the task. From the language revival point of view, ordinary primary schools have a central role in reproducing speaking proficiency in Irish in each new generation. There are a number of reasons for this. First, there is the fact that the overwhelming majority of children learn Irish in ordinary schools (rather than in the considerably smaller number of Gaeltacht or all-Irish schools). Thus, any initiative which enhances the success of such schools has the potential to affect large numbers of pupils and, thereby, make a substantial contribution to the language-revival effort. It must be borne in mind too that a small but significant minority of ordinary schools produce levels of achievement in Irish which approach or equal the average level obtaining in all-Irish schools (Harris and Murtagh, 1999). Second, as we mentioned earlier in the paper, exposure to Irish in ordinary primary schools is more extensive than it is in post-primary schools. Informal use of Irish for school and class communication and Irish-medium teaching is more common at primary because at this level every teacher is an Irish teacher. Thus, for the majority of pupils, primary school provides the most sustained exposure to the spoken language that they will ever have. Ordinary schools have a special importance for the language in other ways too: they lay the groundwork for further language learning at post-primary and third level and, to the extent that they provide the first introduction to Irish, they can have a considerable influence on long-term attitudes towards Irish.

A second crucial factor to be taken into account in developing a policy response to the findings of evaluation studies is the minority, second-language status of Irish. The key sociolinguistic consequence for the teaching of Irish is that pupils have little or no interactive contact with the spoken language outside school. The resulting paradox is that while pupils learn to speak Irish in school in order to use it in their own lives, they know that there are very few occasions outside (particularly involving their peers) in which there might be either a real need, or even an opportunity, to speak it. The problems which this presents for teachers and schools are set out in some detail in Harris *et al.* (1996a,b). For present purposes, we can enumerate just a few of them. First, it is more difficult for both teachers and pupils to identify a proximal goal or motivation outside school for learning to speak the language in the classroom. In addition, in teaching the language, and in developing tasks and materials for use within the classroom, it is more difficult to identify situations, contexts and even language registers which make the prospect of using Irish credible or plausible. Another result is that the range of authentic Irish-language materials and the volume of commercially-produced resources available for teaching and learning Irish at this level bears no comparison with that available in the case of the major European languages.

It must be emphasised that these are challenges, not insurmountable difficulties. It is important to acknowledge them however if structures and resources equal to the task are to be provided. The response required has both creative and research-and-development dimensions. The creative challenge is, in some respects, analogous to that confronted by Irish-programme makers in TG4 and RTÉ - and indeed by Irish dramatists and writers - who wish to use Irish to reflect and incorporate life outside Gaeltacht areas. But the creative work in the case of primary schools needs to be backed up by, and located within, a sustained research-and-development enterprise - to identify educational problems and possibilities, to set up pilot programmes, and to ensure that adequate provision is made for in-service

training. Essentially, what is required is a long-term exercise in educational and language planning focused on the complex interaction between the school on the one hand and the home/community on the other. Among the tasks to be done are the following:

(a) Provide a support system for the teaching and learning of Irish, taking account both of the educational aspects of the issue and the national aim of promoting bilingualism and the wider use of Irish.

(b) Adopt a proactive approach towards this task - finding out what teachers, parents and pupils require in the way of materials etc.; identifying the problems and possibilities which exist in relation to teaching and learning Irish; and establishing pilot schemes and commissioning research to investigate new ways of responding to these.

(c) Coordinate the production of textbooks and audio, video and IT-based teaching and learning materials.

(d) Identify in-service needs generally, and to ensure, in particular, that adequate training and support is provided for teachers who are involved in new initiatives relating to Irish.

(e) Establish what various agencies and institutions could contribute to developing a more supportive out-of-school environment for primary school pupils learning Irish; coordinate the work of these various bodies; and provide a forum for ideas and debate in this area.

We cannot discuss all these points in any detail, but it may be useful to mention some of the implications of the development projects already discussed for (3) and (4) above. In producing textbooks and other materials, there are advantages, as the *Communicative Materials Project* showed, in having applied linguists working side by side with a consultative groups of teachers, who try out new materials and approaches in their own classrooms and report back their experiences and the reaction of pupils. The issues which Irish-language materials development and teaching at primary level must constantly confront are discussed in some detail in Harris *et al.* (1996a,b). We can take just one of these issues, language registers, for illustrative purposes here. Because the day-to-day experiences of most children of primary-school age outside the Gaeltacht has not yet found expression in Irish, Irish-language registers appropriate to many situations of interest to them have yet to evolve. Consequently, pupils often feel ill at ease using forms of language that they associate with the formality of school rather than with 'real' life outside. It will require an ongoing effort to find innovative solutions to problems such as these. As we pointed out in the report on the *Communicative Materials Project*, a number of strategies may be needed - e.g. involving creative writers in Irish as well as those with educational expertise directly in materials development, and soliciting the opinions of pupils themselves about ways of using Irish in their own lives.

Creating opportunities for young people to influence the evolution of the language is an important enterprise in its own right, of course, since it is young people who bring vitality and change to any language. Experimentation and failure are an inevitable part of this process of innovation. The alternative is the provision of learning materials which can all too quickly acquire the dated characteristics of which pupils complained so often in the *Twenty-Classroom Study*. It scarcely needs to be said that the introduction of a communicative approach to teaching Irish will not, in itself, solve the problems we have been talking about here - although their existence, and the need to respond to them, is brought more clearly into focus with a communicative approach. In structural-linguistic or language-practice based approaches, or where the emphasis is on narrative texts, the realities of using the language for real communication may never be confronted and so sociolinguistic issues can be more easily obscured or ignored.

The *Teaching through Irish Project* also has implications for how Irish at primary level must be supported. First, there is the question of why such materials were not developed earlier, and why the content-based teaching option has not been more vigorously promoted - given that a substantial minority of teachers already conduct a small amount of Irish-medium instruction, mainly in music and physical education (Harris 1983, 1993; Harris and Murtagh, 1988a; INTO, 1985). Second, because the project was a limited one, designed simply to explore possibilities in the area, Irish-medium materials suitable for other grades and subjects have not yet been developed. Third, the project illustrates how in-service workshops can be used to develop innovative approaches to the teaching of Irish. It also serves as a model for how a limited programme of instruction through Irish in ordinary schools could be promoted more widely on an entirely voluntary basis. Workshops allow teachers an opportunity to

share experiences and to provide mutual support as they respond to the new professional challenges presented by teaching through Irish.

The task for the future will be to identify and exploit precisely these kinds of possibilities at the earliest possible moment. While the ITÉ project makes an initial contribution, further initiatives are needed - materials-development for other grades and subjects, and the establishment of pilot schemes and in-service. Without the support and validation provided by a comprehensive scheme, it will continue to be difficult for individual teachers, acting alone, to choose this teaching option. In that case, the potential for Irish-medium teaching in ordinary schools will almost certainly remain dormant.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that a carefully coordinated approach to tackling problems related to Irish at primary level may provide guidance and direction for the language-promotion and revival effort nationally. Some of the enduring problems in the two domains are the same: for example, how to energise people to actually begin using the language for real communication and how to identify and cultivate registers and contexts of use which facilitate the switch to Irish. If we can find practical solutions to some of these problems in a school context, perhaps these solutions can also be applied in the larger language-promotion domain.

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