Language and Literacy in Irish-medium Primary Schools: Review of Literature

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November 2006

Contents

3

Part 1

Language Education for Language Maintenance:

A Review of the Macro-Issues

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1. Language and Education

Languages exist independently of educational institutions. Languages do not need education systems to survive and be transmitted from one generation to the next. Education, in itself, of course, adds nothing intrinsic to a language. It is true to say, nonetheless, that linguistic policies over the centuries have targeted educational systems to further use and development of the more 'dominant' languages and to promote linguistic uniformity and standardisation. Educational policies in nation states over previous centuries have created, for example, a monolingual school model, still widespread in many parts of Europe and the whole of the Western world. This monolingual school model has often institutionalised an association between schooling and dominant prestigious languages.

Challenges to this model emerged in the increasing democratisation of education in the later half of the 20th century with linguistic policies beginning to espouse and promote diversity and to encourage bilingualism and plurilingualism. Testimonies have been gathered in research and practice favouring bilingualism and plurilingualism and claims have been made for the former in terms of its contributions to the cognitive and social development of school children.

Many linguistic communities, nevertheless, have no access to education. It is worth noting that recent research conducted by Martí et al (2005) on behalf of UNESCO showed that at least a third of world languages are not represented in educational institutions located in their indigenous speech communities. The research included accounts of languages which were once present in educational systems but are no longer so (Marti et al 2005: 152). The authors conclude:

> When the population goes to school but their own language is not present, it is difficult to imagine what benefit these children can obtain from these schools. The negation of identity involved in a situation of this sort is unimaginable for the majority of the citizens belonging to communities with a dominant language. These citizens have grown up thinking that education can only be transmitted in

certain languages or that it is best if it is done only in the dominant language. In many cases, this is also the opinion deliberately instilled into citizens belonging to communities with minorised languages that are not reflected in the educational system… The right to an education in one's mother tongue constitutes a fundamental right recognised by UNESCO since 1953. Nevertheless most linguistic communities cannot exercise it (Martí et al:153).

While it is true that languages can survive without schools, education systems, nevertheless have become the cornerstone in the process of reversing language shift in cases of minorised or endangered languages.

2. Language revitalisation and reversing language shift

Language revitalisation is best conceptualised as a type of societal level language shift (King 2001:3) and involves macro societal-level cultural and socioeconomic processes as well as the often overlooked micro-interactional factors of language acquisition. Crucially it involves restoring vitality (Spolsky 1998:56) or natural intergenerational transmission to a language already moribund or endangered or whose use has become contracted. Language revitalisation is the targeted goal of language revival efforts. It involves a reversal of language shift where people start using a language that has been moribund or threatened by extinction, so that its vitality is gradually restored (Spolsky 1996:6). It involves firstly, the processes of reversing language shift which are characterised by the sustained efforts of the speech community to resist language loss and secondly, it involves language maintenance which is defined as the continued use of the language in as many domains (social situations) as possible. These processes entail conscious collective effort often in the face of adverse circumstances (King 2001:3).

3. Language revitalisation, reversing language shift and the school

The school has become one of most critical sites for reversing language shift and for language revitalisation in minority/ endangered language contexts. Of all domains the school is perhaps the most crucial and often bears the entire burden of language planning implementation (Ferguson 2006:33). The reasons for this are reasonably straightforward. Education is often state funded and controlled by the state and thus can be readily used as an agency of state language planning. This possibility of

increasing the numbers and users speaking a particular language has been designated by Cooper (1989) as a particular type of language policy called 'acquisition policy.'

Ferguson (2006:34), discussing the function of language education in language planning contexts distinguishes between acquisition policy and *language planning in education* (Ferguson 2006:34). Language planning in education involves addressing the following significant policy issues:

1. The choice of medium of instruction for the various levels of the education system- primary, secondary and tertiary
2. The role and function of the home language in education
3. The choice of other languages as curricular subjects of instructions
4. Decisions on when languages are introduced into the curriculum
5. Decisions on whether languages are to be made compulsory for whom and for how long
6. What varieties of a particular language will serve as a model or norm for teaching purposes.

These issues of course are not exclusively educational ones but critically involve wider social and political influences and consequences.

Another reason why the school has become one of the most critical domains in reversing language shift contexts is concerned with the school's role in the socialisation process. Schools are key agencies in socialisation and the curriculum presents the state with an opportunity to shape the attitudes and behaviours of the next generation.

The numbers of minority language students in education continues to rise. Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins (1988) reminded us, however, that many educational issues both at a theoretical level and at the level of policy and practice remain unresolved. One reason that this remains the case is because policies, programmes and public debate remain notably uninformed with respect to the large amount of research that has been conducted on issues related to minority education (Skutnann-Kangas & Cummins 1998:1).

4. Approaching research: A caveat

When approaching the large and growing volume of research on minority languages in education, it becomes necessary to distinguish sociolinguistically between three broad situations:

1. The immigration and refugee situation where the home language spoken by students is a majority language in the country of origin and becomes a minority language in the country of immigration or settlement (e.g. the Mexican community in the U.S. or the Polish community in Ireland)

2. The situation of autochthonous languages, e.g. Irish in Ireland or regional languages Welsh in the UK where the languages are part of intergenerational transmission - L1 of a speech community and the L2 in educational contexts for significant amounts of learners/speakers

3. The situation of indigenous languages in chiefly in Africa, Asia, Central and South America in marginalised speech communities confronted with demise and endangerment due to a history of colonisation, geographical isolation and socio-economic marginalisation.

Literature on minority language education covers all three situations. When sifting through the growing volume of research in the international journals, therefore, one has to confront and take cognisance of essentially different sociolinguistic concepts in language revitalisation, bilingual education, minority language. There is always the danger, however, of clustering all the research on minority languages together, for example, or of applying or transferring research methodologies or results legitimately obtained and sociolinguistically appropriate in one situation to an entirely different one.

While talking account of, and discussing issues arising from the broad sociolinguistic situations, attention is given in this review, therefore, to the results of research, more pertinent to the Irish situation. Before addressing research results relevant to Irish in education, general research findings and questions in relation to language maintenance will be presented. This will be followed by a theoretical discussion of locating the language curriculum in the language maintenance situation.

5. Language Education for Language Maintenance: A summary of the research issues

As mentioned earlier, pre-schools and schools have shown themselves to be critical contexts for both language loss and, revitalisation and maintenance (Ó Laoire, 2005). Research to date on education for language maintenance often centres on educational equity questions, status and institutionalisation issues and the assessment of efficacy of varying bilingual/immersion programmes (e.g. King, 2001). Apart from detailed descriptions of bilingual education programmes in different contexts (e.g. Baker, 1997, May 2005), specific pedagogical issues that are seen to fuel and foster language learning for language use in the speech community do not feature to any great extent in the literature.

Language maintenance comes into play in communities where a language is already revived but where its future involves a precariousness and threat of extinction. In Ireland traditionally language efforts at strengthening and securing domain usage for the language in the Gaeltacht speech communities have constituted language maintenance, whereas outside these communities the task has been one of language restoration, reversing language shift and language revitalisation. There is an important distinction to be made between maintenance and revitalisation in education. While looking at the Gaeltachtaí, a recent report such as COGG (2005) would indicate that education in some Gaeltacht areas must be initially targeted towards revitalisation rather than maintenance.

There is a range of contexts in which language revitalisation can be studied, where conditions vary considerably e.g. contexts of nation-states, indigenous linguistic minorities in nation-states, indigenous groups in post-colonial countries and immigrant language groups. In all these cases, however, language revitalisation and maintenance involves the following defining characteristics or hallmarks:

1. Adding new sets of speakers to the language crucially involving the home domain and intergenerational transmission (Spolsky 1996; King, 2001)
2. Adding new functions by introducing the language into new domains, where it was previously unused or relatively underused
3. The revalorisation of the language to be revived and maintained by its speakers and neo-speakers (Huss et al, 2003)

4. Involvement and activity on behalf of the individual and community of speakers, and awareness that positive attitudes, action, commitment, strong acts of will and sacrifice may be necessary to save and revitalise.

The language must gain access to domains related to socio-economic advancement. Education is a critical domain in this respect. Huss et al (2003:4) point out that schools as well as pre-schools have shown themselves to be critical contexts for both language loss and revitalisation. In communities where formal schooling is linked to economic advancement, without a school system in which the minority language has its proper place, all other revival efforts are likely to falter.

Whereas debate on education for language revival often centres on educational equity questions, status and institutionalisation issues and on the assessment of efficacy of varying bilingual/immersion programmes, the discussion below will review specific pedagogical and curricular issues that are seen as important in fostering language learning for language use in the speech community.

The debate on the role of the school in language revitalisation has centered typically on schools as agents of language revival, examining the concept of language planning and language education policy (Spolsky & Shohamy, 2000) and discussing the potential of schools in community or in national efforts to contribute to language knowledge and language use.

Fishman (1991) claims that schools have limited value in language revival in that restoration and successful survival of a threatened language essentially requires reinstating and relocating the language to be maintained primarily in the home domain in parent-child transmission. Unless schools directly feed into and facilitate the reinstatement of home and family transmission, then they will always occupy a secondary role in language restoration. This does not always happen, however. It is a feature of many language revitalisation movements that they overlook the crucial stage of family transmission (Fishman's 1991 Stage 6 in the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) in an effort to move with undue alacrity to minority language education (May 2000:142)

11

Mindful of the shortcomings of school-based language revitalisation efforts, Hornberger and King (1996:438-439), maintain, however, that school initiatives in some contexts may promote the instruction and use of unified native languages and standardised native language literacies as well as facilitate the very kernel of the spirit of language revival. Of course, schools are also the central arena for the promotion of prescriptive norms.

Schools on their own, therefore, may be ineffective in saving threatened languages (May 2000). Links with the speech community are critical. McCarty (1998), for example, argues that schools must adopt a prominent position in language revitalisation and maintenance efforts since schools have had destructive effects on indigenous languages in the past. Education is also the site where larger political, social, ideological values are transmitted and reflected, the very values which fuel language revival struggle. Schools can thus become awareness-raising agents, sensitising students to language use or lack of language use in community domains and influencing linguistic beliefs, practices and management of the language community. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:570) here refers to the potential of the school in this context as agent of change. The school may also be one of the chief agents of legitimation and institutionalisation in the public domain of the language, a counterforce of language discrimination accruing after centuries of proscription, derogation and neglect.

Schools also operate in global and as well as in national and local contexts, involving varying standards and norms, language attitudes, multilingualism and language prestige. Decisions on the type of programme (school-wide/immersion or targeted/ one-way or two-way) (Hornberger, 1996) are best made through a process involving not just the teachers and curriculum planners, but critically involving the speech community itself. Immersion / content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and bilingual programmes are often the most favoured in revival contexts (e.g. Welsh: Jones 1998; Baker 2001; Maori; Spolsky 1996 Benton & Benton 2001; Irish: Coady & Ó Laoire; Slovinian in Austria: Busch 2001, Sorbian in Germany: Elle 2003 etc). It cannot be suggested, however, that bilingual or immersion programmes can be applicable in multilingual or multicultural societies (Brann 1981; Choudhry 2001; Benson 2003).

Furthermore, bilingual education or immersion education are umbrella terms and often the term may be ambiguous and imprecise (Baker 1997: 173) to refer to the programmes being conducted in a particular school setting. Despite the different contexts, common questions arise around the teaching of language in maintenance contexts. These questions focus on the optimal context and conditions for language maintenance, involving the type of school programme, the curriculum and classroom language use and activities, the space and relationship between the language to be maintained and other languages, language materials and teacher education.

Given the variety and complexity of possible contexts around the world, education policy makers and teachers need to construct the best answer to these questions in their own local contexts.

King (2001) points to one oversight in the general debate on language education for language revival, in that it tends to exclude reference to the specific pedagogical activities that take place in language programmes.

6. Curriculum and language revival/maintenance

One is inclined to speak about language learning programmes in language revitalisation contexts as if such programmes were homogeneous and prone to significant variations and rates of success because of the models of teaching and learning that comprise them. King (2001) shows, for example, in the context of Quichua in the town of Saraguro in the southern highlands of Ecuador that school-based language programmes may be limited by their inappropriate pedagogical approaches, in that they remained conventional and ineffective and had limited impact in stimulating active use of the language among learners.

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 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 second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) instruction.

Communicative competence and proficiency have thus become the central aim of many school-based language programmes with pedagogies and language learning materials generally reflecting this central thrust of emphasis, or with the general features of communicative language teaching (CLT) being gradually absorbed into alternative or traditional methodologies. CLT, however, has particular challenges and advantages within the context of revivalist and maintenance efforts.

One challenge often bedeviling pedagogy is the location and extent of native speakers. As pointed out by Little (2003) in the case of learning Irish, the number of learners of the language at any time may exceed the number of native or accustomed speakers. Pedagogical tasks thus are constrained, given the limited scope for rehearsal of interactions with native speakers. Of central concern here is the urgency or need to communicative in the language in any domain when the dominant language is perceived to be the most appropriate.

This distribution of target language speaking networks may often pose, therefore, a serious problem for the learner, particularly within a communicative framework, where the relevance is wholly identified with societal use. For many schools where the target language is taught as L2 or in immersion contexts where the target (often minority) language is the daily language of daily interactions in the classroom, there is no readily identifiable speech community outside the classroom where such communication might be meaningful. The communicative-type syllabi 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 be authentic or valid within the native speaker community networks inside or outside the speech community.

Secondly, the contraction of social contexts and domains in which the language is naturally used narrows the range of appropriate authentic materials and text-types. The absence of appropriate classroom materials is often a major obstacle. Publishers see a limited market for developing language learning materials and resources in the minority language and thus teachers are forced to construct their own materials, using photocopies, drawings, cut-out magazine clippings with superimposed hand-written captions. In doing so they vie for students' attention and respect who are well familiar

with the glossy sophisticated textbooks and high tech learning materials of the dominant languages.

However, the shift to communicative language teaching has been useful in language instruction for promoting language use in the speech community. This has a positive underlying potential to foster active language use of the maintenance language, in that it draws deliberate attention to domains where the language is used meaningfully in transactions and at the same time introduces the learners to new situations where the language could be potentially used. Thus, in developing receptive competences, for example, learners hear the language as it is used in the speech community, or read authentic texts where printed and literacy texts are available. In developing productive competences, learners engage in role-plays to prepare for interactions with native speakers, neo-speakers or accustomed speakers, even if such interactions might never occur. This approach is somewhat at variance with the remarkably unprogressive methods and passive activities described by King (2003).

It is not always easy, even for very committed students to communicate, or even to know how and when to communicate with native/ neo-speakers speakers of the target language either inside or/and outside the speech community. 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 minority language speakers.

Neighbourhood domains and home domains in the early stages of language revival are very often insufficient for the learner in sustaining or in developing proficiency through use. The school alone may indeed be the only source of language learning and interlanguage development and may never be reinforced by integration into the speech community. This is, perhaps the greatest challenge to acquiring the language and is a strong argument for immersion or content-based language learning as being the best suited pedagogically in the context of revivalist/maintenance efforts.

15

7. Different expectations from curriculum

Schools of their own will not change language behaviours. A complication often is the different goals, definitions and measurements of success employed by different revivalist groups for whom aims tend to vary considerably:

1. One group may aim to just have the language being taught in the schools (one type of syllabus) - once it is being taught, they are happy
2. Another group might aim to re-introduce the language in families and secure intergeneration transmission (another essentially different curriculum).

These two approaches would necessitate different syllabuses. The former would aim to teach the language in some de-contextualized context or for cultural reasons, whereas the latter would stress learning the language for active use and for use in the micro-domain of the family itself. This forces us to answer the question: Why is target language being taught in the first instance?

1. For short-term motivational fulfillment, i.e. communicating in the classroom?
2. Learning the language to secure in the longer term the use of the language in the family domain and thus secure intergeneration transmission.

Both aims can coalesce pedagogically of course. There is a difference, nonetheless, between language learning and language acquisition. Language that is learned may be forgotten, if it not retrieved from short-term memory, or used or activated on a regular basis. Language that is acquired is automated or automatically available. It is possible, to extend and drive interlanguage and fuel acquisition in the classroom if the language is used meaningfully. The communicative and purposeful use of language offers this opportunity. We need not only to give our learners practice in the language through scaffolding, but we must create opportunities for our learners to meaningfully talk and therein process language. The more exposure to the language as in immersion/submersion CLIL programmes and the more opportunities to use the language in a meaningful way, the better the chances of acquisition.

The above discussion suggests that real-life uses of language should be reflected to a large extent in the texts and activities of the classroom. As these activities do not depend on immediate reinforcement outside the classroom, pedagogical activities can

16

be seen as an end in themselves and reflect real peer to peer or teacher to student communication. The classroom, therefore, becomes a valid communicative situation, exploitable to a large extent as a valuable resource for instructed language acquisition (Ellis, 1990). Critical to construction of contexts of acquisition in the classroom is the concern with learning rather than teaching (Little et al, 2000). In the case of acquisition of language in instructed contexts, much remains to be investigated. It is likely however, that research in this will conform to a significant extent with the following basic findings of L2 studies to date. It can be expected, therefore, that significant amounts of language exposure are required. Teaching the language as a subject only is unlikely to succeed. Experience from immersion programmes indicates that a greater investment of hours of exposure may be necessary to achieve acquisition (King 2001:216). Secondly, learners must engage in meaningful interactions in the classroom wherein negotiation for meaning triggers interactional adjustment by native speaker (Long, 1996). The processes of acquisition as well as being contingent on modification of native speaker and comprehensible input depend equally on meaningful interaction with the target language. Finally, as well as teaching and exposing learners to the target language teachers need to equip them with skills in how to learn the language (and other languages) and how to seek out opportunities to use it outside the classroom. Such an approach can imbue teachers and learners alike with a new creative enthusiasm for language in general and create a language awareness that is facilitative of acquisition.

So far this global discussion has elucidated the societal purposes of education in minority languages as the over-riding context in which issues such as the development of early literacy must be placed. The debate on early literacy is secondary in many ways to an over-arching decision or policy on the ultimate direction of education for language revitalisation/maintenance.

The second part of this review addresses some specific questions pertinent to Irish in education.

17

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21

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Part Two

Issues in Irish Immersion at Primary Level

Part 2: Issues in Irish immersion at primary level[1]

In this second part of the paper, three main issues are examined:

1. Research on second-language immersion generally and the need for a comprehensive research and evaluation programme for Irish immersion (*Sections 1- 2 below*)

2. Levels of proficiency in Irish in all-Irish schools and the manner in which proficiency is linked to parental and home background variables (*Sections 3- 8 below*)

3. Issues related to the early introduction of English and the sequencing of early reading in Irish and English (*Sections 9-15 below*).

1. Second-language immersion: Origins, evaluation and impact

From the beginning of the modern phase of immersion in Canada in 1965, French immersion education for children from English-speaking homes has been the focus of a huge number of research studies. Cummins (1991) estimated that there had been approximately a thousand studies in Canada alone. As Johnson & Swain (1997) point out, immersion education has now been in existence long enough to have acquired a distinct identity and a body of theory and research. It is still young enough, however, to be evolving in new directions, arising from new applications of theory and in response to emerging problems. Immersion has spread to many other places around the world and is often employed for language support and revival e.g. in Hawaii, Catalonia and the Basque country (Slaughter, 1997; Artigal, 1993). Johnson & Swain point out that immersion differs from other forms of bilingual education as a consequence of factors such as the role of the second language as a medium of instruction, the nature of the immersion curriculum, the level of support available for the L1, the attempt to achieve additive bilingualism, the fact that L2 exposure is largely confined to the classroom, the student's limited or non-existent L2 proficiency on entry in to the program and the bilingual status of the teachers.

The results of research on Canadian immersion have been summarised and reviewed in a number of major publications (Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain & Lapkin, 1982;

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1 The main focus here is on all-Irish schools in Galltacht (English speaking) areas although we refer in passing to Gaeltacht schools. Some of the issues discussed here are also relevant to Gaeltacht schools but there are a variety of complex additional issues to be considered in the case of Gaeltacht schools that are not discussed here.

Genesee, 1987; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Swain & Johnson, 1997). Many of the studies carried out were originally programme evaluations, focussing on the acquisition of proficiency in English and French in immersion schools, as well as learning outcomes in the other subjects of the curriculum. These evaluations generally confirmed the advantages of immersion in developing a high level of second-language proficiency, particularly the acquisition of almost native-like comprehension skills, but also a high level of fluency and confidence in communicative speaking proficiency. They also showed that pupils' acquisition of fluency and literacy in French was achieved at no apparent cost to their English skills. By grade 5, and earlier for some aspects of English literacy, there was usually no differences between immersion and mainstream school children in English standardised test performance. There is also no evidence of any difference in achievement in the other subjects taught through French.

2. Need for a comprehensive evaluation of Irish immersion

While immersion generally has a strong record of research and evaluation, therefore, studies of all-Irish immersion comparable to those conducted in Canada have yet to be carried out. This does not mean, of course, that we have no objective information at all on the operation of all-Irish schools. The Irish achievement (listening, speaking and in one case reading) of pupils in all-Irish primary schools has been compared with that of pupils in ordinary and Gaeltacht schools in a number of national surveys over a 25 year period (Harris, 1984, 1988, 1991; Harris & Murtagh, 1987,1988a, 1988b; Harris, Forde, Archer, Nic Fhearaile & O Gorman, 2006). The findings of these studies are summarised below and confirm the success of Irish immersion in producing a high level of proficiency in Irish. Some of these national surveys have also examined the relationship between Irish-immersion pupils general academic ability (as measured by English verbal reasoning test) and achievement in Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1987) and have also related a range of social, linguistic and educational home-background variables to their L2 proficiency in Irish (Harris et al, 2006). There have also been a number of very useful studies of particular aspects of Irish-immersion programmes (e.g., Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1979; Henry, Andrews & Ó Cainín, 2002; Ní Bhaoill & Ó Duibhir, 2004).

But all of these still do not amount to the kind of broad-based evaluation that would be aligned specifically with the needs, characteristics, and processes of all-Irish education

25

and that would be driven by the particular theoretical and empirical issues to which immersion gives rise. Apart from deepening our understanding of how immersion works in the case of Irish, high-quality evaluation studies could make a great contribution to the long-term growth of all-Irish education just as they have done elsewhere. The most urgent reason for carrying out this work, however, is that despite the evidence mentioned above for the positive impact of Irish immersion on speaking proficiency, there are a number of particular challenges facing schools in the sector that require investigation. Three of these challenges are discussed in some detail below:

1. The significance of variations in Irish-immersion children's speaking proficiency related to variables such as socioeconomic, sociolinguistic and educational variables
2. The quality of all-Irish children's command of the spoken language
3. The early introduction of English in all-Irish schools and the sequencing of early reading in Irish and English.

To begin, however, it will be useful to look at the evidence relating to the levels of proficiency in Irish produced by all-Irish schools.

3. Irish immersion: High levels of proficiency maintained despite rapid growth

The main source of evidence on achievement in Irish in primary schools is a series of national surveys conducted in ordinary mainstream schools, all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools in the late 1970s and 1980s (Harris, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1988; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a,b). These showed that about one-third of pupils in ordinary schools attained mastery of each of a number of curricular objectives in Irish (Listening and Speaking) at sixth, fourth, and second grade. Achievement in all-Irish schools, however, was considerably higher than in either ordinary mainstream or Gaeltacht schools. In the case of each Irish Speaking and Irish Listening objective tested, *the highest percentage of pupils attaining mastery was always associated with all-Irish schools*, the second-highest with Gaeltacht schools, and the lowest with ordinary schools. In second grade, for example, the mean percentage of pupils attaining mastery of each of ten speaking and listening objectives in all-Irish primary schools was 83.8%, while it was 57.9% in Gaeltacht schools and 31.1 % in ordinary schools.

More recent research, again based on national samples (Harris et al, 2006) shows that the success of all-Irish schools in developing high levels of proficiency has in most respects being maintained during a period of unprecedented growth in the sector. While Irish-immersion pupil numbers increased from 1.1% to more than 5% nationally in the period between 1985 and 2002, the Harris et al data show that they have maintained generally high standards of achievement in Irish. Overall mean scores on Irish Listening in Irish-immersion schools, for example, do not differ significantly over the 17-year period since the mid 1980s. By comparison, overall mean scores in ordinary mainstream schools fell from 46.9 (SD 13.65) to 34 (SD 9.35) – a statistically significant drop and one which very nearly equals the 1985 standard deviation. While the Harris et al study shows there was a significant decline in Irish-immersion schools in the percentages of pupils attaining mastery of *some objectives relating to grammar and morphology*[2] (which were tested by relatively small numbers of items), performance on *the main Irish Listening and Irish Speaking objectives* remained essentially the same. There was a significant *increase* in the percentage attaining mastery of one objective.

In the case of Irish Listening, for example, the percentage attaining mastery of *Listening vocabulary* was 90.4% in 1985 and 89.3% in 2002, while the percentages for *General comprehension of speech* were 96.4% in 1985 and 96.3% in 2002. Similarly, the major Irish Speaking objectives of *Fluency of oral description, Communication* (second grade), and *Speaking vocabulary* showed no significant difference between the two points in time.

The views of teachers in all-Irish schools about changes in standards of achievement in Irish in Harris et al (2006) are consistent with this overall trend: 34.6% of pupils in all-Irish schools were taught by teachers who believed that there had been no change in standards of speaking proficiency in Irish in the previous 15 years, while the remainder were almost equally divided between those whose teachers perceived a decline (29.3%) and an improvement (27%). This is in sharp contrast to the perceptions of teachers in ordinary and Gaeltacht schools where, particularly in the case of the former, a decline in pupil speaking proficiency is reported by a large majority.

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[2] We return to a discussion of the significance of these weaknesses in proficiency later and consider the implications for research and evaluation relating to the improvement of Irish-immersion pupils' proficiency.

The success of all-Irish schools in gradually becoming a more mainstream option, while at the same time continuing to produce high levels of pupil proficiency in Irish generally, represents a major contribution to strengthening the language nationally. Harris et al argue that by producing substantial numbers of pupils with high levels of proficiency, all-Irish schools may be crossing a crucial threshold in terms of contributing to the formation of Irish-speaking networks outside Gaeltacht areas. This effect is enhanced in so far as individual all-Irish schools themselves, like all schools, can often provide a focus for the development of social networks. Because all-Irish schools bring together a greater proportion of parents with relatively high levels of ability in Irish, who might otherwise be rather thinly dispersed in the population, the possibility that adult and family Irish-speaking networks will develop is greater (see Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1979).

4. Home background variables and Irish proficiency in Irish immersion

We turn now to a number of issues related to:

a. differences in the social, linguistic and educational profile of all-Irish school parents compared to ordinary mainstream-school parents and
b. variations in the levels of Irish proficiency (i) between different all-Irish *schools* (ii) between pupils (i.e. within all-Irish schools) related to parental and home background variables and (iii) possible links between home-background variables on the one hand and between-school variations in levels of Irish proficiency achieved by all-Irish schools on the other.

These issues are important because we need to:

a. identify the real source of the all-Irish schools' success in producing high levels of proficiency in Irish (school effects versus home background effects)
b. understand the different circumstances in which different all-Irish schools may operate and the challenges to which individual schools may have to respond.

Harris et al (2006) show that all-Irish parents generally have a 'better' profile than ordinary mainstream-school parents in terms of their attitudes to Irish, their own ability to speak Irish, the frequency with which they use Irish at home, their own educational

background and their socioeconomic status.[3] They also found that various aspects of parents' profile was significantly linked to pupils' achievement in Irish Listening, Irish Speaking and/or Irish Reading. A key question arising from this, therefore, is:

> *Could the success of all-Irish schools in producing high levels of proficiency in Irish (compared to ordinary schools), be largely or entirely 'explained away' by differences in the parents' socioeconomic, linguistic or educational profile?*

The evidence strongly suggests the answer is 'No.'

To illustrate this, it will be useful to look first at some of the differences between parents in the three populations of schools studied by Harris et al.[4] In Table 1 below, the answer options on the left relate to a question which asked parents 'what is your general attitude to Irish now?' In ordinary mainstream schools, the most common category of response was 'neutral' (39.6%), followed closely by 'favourable' (34.2%). Smaller percentages were 'very favourable,' 'unfavourable' or 'very unfavourable.' The contrast with the attitudes of all-Irish school parents, which are the most favourable in all three populations of schools, is striking. For example, 56.5% of all-Irish school parents were very favourable towards Irish, compared to 46.7% of Gaeltacht parents, and 14.5% of ordinary mainstream-school parents. A further 35.9% of all-Irish parents were favourable. Only 0.7% were unfavourable to any extent.

Table 1: Percentage of parents associated with ordinary mainstream schools, all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools according to their general attitude to Irish

Parents' general attitude to Irish now	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Very Favourable	14.5% *(0.71)*	56.5% *(3.12)*	46.7% *(3.48)*
Favourable	34.2% *(0.97)*	35.9% *(2.56)*	35.6% *(2.42)*
Neutral	39.6% *(0.96)*	6.6% *(0.98)*	14.7% *(2.03)*
Unfavourable/Very unfavourable	11.2% *(0.67)*	0.7% *(0.35)*	2.6% *(0.80)*
Missing	0.5% *(0.13)*	0.3% *(0.22)*	0.5% *(0.42)*

Based on Harris et al (2006). Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575

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[3] All-Irish parents also had a better profile than Gaeltacht parents, at least in so far as attitudes to Irish are concerned. Gaeltacht parents have a better profile than either all-Irish or ordinary-school parents in terms of ability to speak Irish and frequency of use of Irish (See Harris et al, 2006).
[4] Tables 1-3 adapted from Harris et al (2006).

29

Table 2: Percentage of parents associated with ordinary mainstream schools, all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools according to their self-assessed ability to speak Irish

Parents' ability to speak Irish	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
No Irish	10.8% *(0.89)*	1.8% *(0.64)*	3.3% *(0.78)*
Only the odd word	21.2% *(0.97)*	8.2% *(1.30)*	8.1% *(1.39)*
A few simple sentences	37.7% *(1.18)*	26.9% *(1.65)*	15.8% *(2.19)*
Parts of conversation	22.6% *(1.00)*	38.3% *(2.44)*	19.9% *(2.37)*
Most conversations	6.2% *(0.51)*	18.7% *(1.90)*	14.1% *(2.13)*
Native speaker ability	1.0% *(0.18)*	5.8% *(1.17)*	37.2% *(5.21)*
Missing	0.6% *(0.14)*	0.4% *(0.24)*	1.7% *(0.71)*

Based on Harris et al (2006). Standard error in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575

We turn next to parents' assessment of their own *ability to speak Irish* based on replies to a multiple choice question. Table 2 shows that the speaking category with which the greatest percentage of parents associate themselves differs by type of school: 'a few simple sentences' in the case of ordinary mainstream-school parents (37.7%), 'parts of conversations' for all-Irish school parents (38.3%), and 'native-speaker ability' for Gaeltacht school parents (37.2%). It can be seen also that a combined total of 32% of ordinary mainstream-school parents assign themselves to one of the two lowest Irish-speaking categories: 'No Irish' and 'the odd word.' By comparison with these ordinary school parents, only 10% of all-Irish parents and 11.4% of Gaeltacht parents rated their speaking ability as low as 'no Irish' or 'only the odd word.'

Table 3: Percentage of parents (respondents) associated with ordinary mainstream schools, all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools according to the frequency with which they speak Irish to their child

Parent speaks Irish to child -	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Always	0.1% *(0.09)*	1.1% *(0.55)*	22.6% *(4.76)*
Very often	1.0% *(0.24)*	5.2% *(1.04)*	8.1% *(1.73)*
Often	2.2% *(0.29)*	15.6% *(1.97)*	14.5% *(2.39)*
Occasionally	20.6% *(0.82)*	43.4% *(1.73)*	25.7% *(2.78)*
Seldom	33.1% *(0.99)*	25.5% *(1.17)*	17.7% *(2.34)*
Never	42.3% *(1.28)*	8.4% *(1.45)*	10.8% *(1.89)*
Missing	0.7% *(0.15)*	0.8% *(0.45)*	0.7% *(0.45)*

Based on Harris et al (2006). Standard error in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575

Table 3 presents data from the Harris et al study on the *use of Irish by parents at home* in all-Irish schools, compared to ordinary mainstream and Gaeltacht schools. It can be seen that substantial percentages of the parents of pupils in ordinary schools rarely if ever spoke Irish to their children (33.1% 'seldom' and 42.3% 'never'). The combined percentage for the 'seldom' and 'never' categories of use (75.4%) may be compared with the combined percentage in the three lowest categories of *speaking ability* among ordinary mainstream-school parents in Table 2 (69.7%). It is much less common in all-Irish schools to have parents speaking Irish with such a low frequency to their children: while 25.5% of all-Irish parents 'seldom' speak Irish to the child, only 8.4% 'never' do.[5]

5. All-Irish school impact on proficiency not primarily explainable by parent profile

In other analyses, Harris et al show that the success of all-Irish schools in producing high levels of pupil achievement in Irish (relative, for example, to ordinary mainstream schools) does not depend in any essential way on these linguistically related differences in home background, or on other parental education or social factors. What all the comparisons crucially show is that pupils in all-Irish schools *who have no such linguistic, social, or educational advantages* still succeed in reaching levels of achievement in Irish which are *substantially higher (to a statistically significant degree)*

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[5] Only in the case of Gaeltacht schools do substantial percentages of parents speak Irish to their child as their everyday language of choice – 22.6% 'Always' speak Irish to the child. The most frequently-chosen description of frequency of use of Irish with the child in Gaeltacht schools, however, is 'occasionally' (25.7%), the same frequency-of-use category which is also most often selected by all-Irish parents (43.4%).

than the achievements of pupils in ordinary mainstream-schools *who do have* such linguistic social or educational advantages. This adds weight to the argument that the *essential* contribution of all-Irish schools derives from the fact that they are Irish-medium, so that extensive and sustained in-school contact with the language *is equally available to all pupils.*

To show this, Harris et al compared various aspects of achievement in Irish in two groups of pupils:

Group 1   'Irish-disadvantaged background'. Pupils in *all-Irish* schools whose parents' ability in Irish is at the level of 'No Irish/the odd word/simple sentences' and who 'seldom or never' speak Irish to their child.

Group 2   'Irish-advantaged background'. Pupils in *ordinary* schools whose parents ability to speak Irish is at the level of 'most conversations/native speaker' and who speak Irish to their child 'occasionally (or more often)' – the highest category in ordinary schools which will provide enough children to make a worthwhile comparison.

The results show clearly that 'Irish-*disadvantaged*-background' pupils in all-Irish schools (Group 1) have a level of performance on Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading which *greatly exceeds* the level of the 'Irish-advantaged background' group in ordinary mainstream schools (and to a statistically significant degree). For example, the mean percentage correct on the Irish Listening Test for the 'Irish-disadvantaged' pupils in all-Irish schools was 83.0% (SE=1.4) while for the 'Irish-advantaged' pupils in ordinary mainstream schools it was only 53.6% (SE=1.23). The mean percentage correct on the Irish Speaking Test for the 'Irish-disadvantaged' all-Irish group was 79.5% (SE=3.05) while for the 'Irish advantaged' ordinary-school group it was only 52.8% (SE=3.31).

Harris et al made a similar comparison between (i) the Irish achievement of those pupils in all-Irish schools who were least advantaged in terms of parents' *educational and socio-economic backgrounds* and (ii) pupils in ordinary mainstream schools whose parents were most advantaged in these same terms. The two groups of pupils whose Irish achievement were compared were:

1. pupils in all-Irish schools whose parents' highest level of education was the Intermediate Certificate and who were also in receipt of a medical card and

2. pupils in ordinary schools whose parents had a third-level degree and were not in receipt of a medical card.

Again, the all-Irish 'disadvantaged' group of pupils had a substantially higher performance than the 'advantaged' ordinary group on all three Irish tests. For example, mean percentage correct on a 25-item Irish Reading test (the one common to all-Irish and ordinary schools) was 69.1% (SE=3.11) for the all-Irish 'disadvantaged' group, but only 45.2% (SE=0.89) for the ordinary school 'advantaged' group. For Irish Listening, the means were 77.6% (SE=2.05) and 51.4% (SE= 0.93) respectively. There can be little doubt, therefore, that the all-Irish schools' contribution to pupils' proficiency does not depend in any critical way on the kind of linguistic and socioeconomic advantages just described.

6. Need for research on between-pupil and between-school variance in Irish proficiency

Despite this, however, the fact remains that there are significant relationships between parental variables and all-Irish school pupils' proficiency in Irish. In addition, to these individual pupil/parent level relationships, other data from the Harris et al study indicate the existence of relatively large between-school variance in achievement in Irish[6] in all-Irish schools (as well as in ordinary mainstream and Gaeltacht schools). Presumably, at least some of this school-level variation within the all-Irish sector relates to these same individual pupil/parent linguistic, social and educational variables.[7] While further research would be necessary to test this latter hypothesis, the evidence does seem to suggest the possibility of two or more distinctive groups of schools within the all-Irish population in terms of proficiency in Irish. It would be very well worthwhile to investigate

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[6] Irish Listening, Irish Speaking and Irish Reading.
[7] In this context, as well as in relation to reading issues discussed later, Bialystok & Cummins (1991) comments are significant: "In Canada, more than 250,000 students from mainly English backgrounds are enrolled in French immersion programs as a means of developing bilingualism. The initial results of these program tended to be highly positive, with students developing close to native–like receptive skills in French and relatively fluent (but by no means native–like) expressive skills (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). However, as students entering immersion programs have gradually diversified with respect to socioeconomic and linguistic background, results have become more mixed: for example, not all students succeed equally well and a small but significant proportion drop out of the program during the early grades. A number of investigators (e.g. Cummins, 1987) have suggested that pedagogy in immersion programs requires greater individualization to address the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population' (P. 226).

this question, exploring in particular any links between parental social, linguistic and education variables on the one hand and between-school variance on the other. It would be useful also to investigate whether these between-school differences in turn, either in Irish proficiency[8] or in parental background, are linked in any way to the variation in school practice relating to the sequencing of early reading in Irish and English within the all-Irish sector which is discussed later in the paper (See Sections 9-15 below).

7. Need for research on the quality of all-Irish pupils' Irish

Despite the success of immersion programmes in developing speaking proficiency, studies have also found explicit weaknesses in learners' grammatical, lexical and sociolinguistic development (Lyster, 1987; Harley, Allen, Cummins & Swain, 1990). The importance of verb morphology is that it has a crucial semantic role in communication. Yet this kind of difficulty with certain aspects of grammar has been a feature of immersion programmes in many countries such as Canada where pupils, despite being able to communicate effectively at a high level in the language, appear to have certain 'fossilised' linguistic errors which are difficult to eradicate. The immersion classroom in Canada, which typically might consist of 25 learners of French and one native or near-native speaker of French as the teacher, produces a distinct interlanguage by Grade 8 (Lyster, 1987). As soon as students achieve a level of competence in French which allows them to communicate their intended meaning to one another, there appears to be little impetus for them to be more accurate in their use of the language in conveying their message (Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain, 1985, 1993).

Probably the greatest cause for concern in the all-Irish schools results reported in Harris et al (2006) is the evidence for a decrease in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery of the verb-related objective in Irish Listening. The percentage of pupils attaining mastery of the objective *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* is down significantly, from 76.1% in 1985 to 61.3% in 2002. The slippage in performance involved, however, is to a more basic level of achievement ('at least minimal progress') rather than to 'failure.' The percentage failing the verb objective in 2002 is negligible (0.6%) and does not differ from 1985. While the corresponding objective on the Irish

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[8] Ní Bhaoill & Ó Duibhir (2004) emphasise that issues of early reading cannot be adequately assessed without taking account of other language skills - listening, speaking and writing.

Speaking Test, *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking,* also suffers a fall in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery, the difference in this case is not significant. The change in the *failure* rate over time for this objective is not significant either.

Research in recent years has related these problems to features of existing immersion teaching practices and this, in turn, has led to the development of promising approaches to ameliorating them. Swain & Carroll (1987) report that observational studies of grade 3 and grade 6 immersion classrooms showed that grammar was taught at particular times of the day and that the rules, paradigms and grammatical categories being learnt tended to be separated from their meaning. A focus on form-related meaning in the context of content-based activities, which might have reinforced grammatical points studied during language classes, was absent. Swain and Carroll argued that more regularity and systematicity in linguistic analysis and in the handling of error correction were needed in immersion contexts. Subsequent studies showed that focussing teaching on a particular feature of the language within a meaningful communicative context enhanced learning and helped to overcome environmental weaknesses in the programme's setting (Day & Shapson, 1991; Harley, 1989; Lyster, 1993). Other studies showed that collaborative tasks can be used to encourage groups of students to think and talk about the function and application of grammar in specific writing activities. With the inclusion of final corrective feedback as part of this process, existing knowledge of form and function can be consolidated or modified and new knowledge generated (Kowal & Swain, 1997).

8. Need for research on possible changing profile of all-Irish parents as sector expands

Harris et al (2006) point out that one important thing we do not know about all-Irish school parents is whether their social, linguistic or educational profile has *changed* between 1985 and 2002 as the sector significantly expanded. Unfortunately, while we have some information relating to home language in all-Irish schools in 1985 - based on questions put to pupils and teachers (Harris & Murtagh, 1987) - the data are not comparable to 2002 data which were collected from the parents themselves. Nor do we have comparable information for 1985 and 2002 on other variables such as parental ability to speak Irish, educational level, or social class. It would not be surprising, of course, if the profile of all-Irish parents *had indeed changed to some extent* over the period in question as these schools became - relatively speaking at least - more

35

mainstream. The expectation would be that their profile had become somewhat more like that of ordinary mainstream-school parents, compared to what it had been when the all-Irish sector was much smaller and less mainstream.

Given that the Harris et al study shows that background linguistic, educational, and social factors are significantly related to pupil achievement in Irish, any change in the profile of all-Irish parents over time would be of interest in trying to account for the decline in the percentage of all-Irish pupils attaining mastery of the two verb-related objectives mentioned above. Changes in the profile of all-Irish parents could also be important in accounting for any future changes in the quality of immersion-children's Irish more generally and in understanding the factors governing all-Irish schools' decisions about the sequencing of early reading instruction in Irish and English (See discussion in Sections 9-15 below). Arguably, all-Irish school parents who had relatively high levels of speaking proficiency in Irish, and who frequently used Irish with their child, might be expected to provide exactly the kind of real communicative environment which would help to prevent or correct some of the more persistent errors which are characteristic of the L2 speech of children in Irish immersion. If the proportion of all-Irish parents with these high levels of speaking ability were to decline over time, for example, or if such parents were to be present in smaller proportions in some all-Irish schools as the sector continued to expand, information on these trends would be of considerable use in planning and policy development within the sector and in interpreting other data on all-Irish education.

It would be of considerable interest in future surveys and evaluation work, therefore, to collect information on the linguistic, educational and socioeconomic profile of all-Irish and ordinary school parents comparable to the information collected in Harris et al (2006).

9. Sequencing the introduction of early Irish and English reading in all-Irish schools

We turn now to another set of issues concerning Irish immersion which have long been the subject of discussion: whether English as a subject should be introduced in the early years of all-Irish education, and the related question of whether reading in the

children's second language (Irish) should be introduced before reading in English.[9] These questions are important because practice varies from school to school and because there appears to be no general agreement on many of the issues involved. Ní Bhaoill & Ó Duibhir (2004) report that 58% of all-Irish schools begin formal reading instruction in *Irish* first (IRF[10]) while 36.4% begin reading instruction in *English* first (ERF[11]). Only 5.7% of all-Irish schools begin reading instruction in both Irish and English at the same time. By comparison, it may be noted that early immersion in Canada usually involves 100% French in Kindergarten and Grade 1 and sometimes in Grade 2 and 3 as well.

The question of sequencing is also important, of course, because in the case of a minority language such as Irish, which is not widely encountered by pupils outside school, it is clearly desirable that, as far as possible, the school should be the one domain where Irish is the sole language. The initial years in an immersion school are particularly important in establishing the convention that all interaction in the school should be in Irish.

In this section, an attempt will be made to set out some of the issues to which the reading sequencing question gives rise. It will be argued that the existing international research is not adequate to decide the reading sequencing issue clearly in the context of Irish immersion - either in a general way or in particular schools. It is proposed that a substantial, comprehensive study of early reading in all-Irish schools is needed in order to clarify issues and inform the debate. This research is particularly needed for two reasons: (1) because Irish immersion differs from the most common forms of immersion in Canada in a number of ways outlined below which may be central to the reading- sequencing issue (2) because of the more general lack of large scale evaluation research on the nature, processes and impact of Irish-medium education comparable to that carried out on immersion in Canada and which would provide the objective context and information necessary for an informed debate. Apart from contributing to our understanding of the specific issue in Ireland, however, such a study could make a major contribution to the international literature relating to the early

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[9] Most of the discussion here focuses on reading.
[10] For convenience, IRF will be used to refer to those all Irish primary schools in which the introduction of English is delayed to some extent or in which Irish reading is introduced before English reading.
[11] ERF will be used to refer to all Irish primary schools which introduce English from the beginning, or which introduce reading in English before reading in Irish.

introduction of the home language in immersion and to the issue of the sequencing of early reading.

The discussion below focuses on two main justifications for introducing Irish reading before English reading (the pattern favoured by 58% of schools) – (1) the linguistic interdependence principle and (2) established practice relating to the sequencing of early reading in immersion, particularly in Canada. These are also the same reasons which are often advanced in other immersion contexts for the strategy adopted in relation to early reading. It will be argued that while both the linguistic interdependence principle, and practice in Canadian immersion, provide support for the strategy of IRF all-Irish schools, they do not, for a number of reasons, necessarily undermine the different strategy of ERF all-Irish schools. The issues involved should ideally be decided by comprehensive research. In the meantime, however, it must be acknowledged that in our present state of knowledge, the different strategies of IRF and ERF all-Irish schools may well represent the optimum response *at individual school level* to different educational, social and linguistic circumstances. There is no necessary reason why best practice in this area should be the same in *all* all-Irish schools. The discussion concludes with a set of questions on which research relating to the sequencing of early reading in all-Irish schools might focus.

10. The interdependence principle and all-Irish practice relating to the introduction of English and English reading

Beginning reading instruction in L2 before reading in L1 in the context of immersion is usually justified on the basis that skills in second-language reading appear to transfer readily to first (majority) language reading later. The 'interdependence principle' states (Cummins, 1981, p. 29) that 'to the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly.' Thus, even though the outer form of languages and language use differ (e.g. pronunciation, fluency, etc.), there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that is common across languages. This *common underlying proficiency* makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related skills across languages.

While both the linguistic interdependence principle itself, as well as actual Canadian immersion practice generally, appears to validate the approach of the majority of all-Irish schools that begin reading instruction in Irish first, the issues are in fact extremely complex. The linguistic interdependence principle, however, actually predicts, and is consistent with evidence, that skills in *L1 reading* will also transfer to L2 (Noonan, Colleaux & Yackulic, 1997) – which in relation to reading issues at least validates the approach of the minority of all-Irish schools (ERF schools) who begin reading in English first.

Cummins (2000a) does argue that the transfer of literacy skills across languages is more likely to operate from the minority to the majority language because of the greater exposure to literacy in the majority language outside of school and the strong social pressure to acquire reading skills in that language. Yet, he also recognises the significance of research by Verhoeven (1991) in the Netherlands showing that transfer of literacy-related skills can occur both ways in bilingual programs: from minority to majority languages and from majority to minority languages. Similar results are reported by Cashion & Eagan (1990) in the case of early French immersion. They found that as pupils spontaneously acquired English reading and writing skills, they transferred this knowledge from English to French. In addition, this process of transfer of reading and writing skills from their first to their second language was much more evident than the transfer of literacy-related skills from their second to their first language (French to English).

A more general difficulty about using the linguistic interdependence principle as a basis for decision-making, or for prescribing strategy in relation to the early introduction of the child's home language (L1) in particular immersion contexts is that it is a principle or explanation of a very general kind. It does not specify the mechanisms of skill transfer from reading in one language to reading in another. In addition, in situations where reading instruction begins in the second language (Irish), it is difficult to know to what extent the effective operation of the interdependence principle depends on a substantial parental/home contribution in relation to reading in the majority language (e.g. giving children the experience of being read to, promoting reading in English at home and so on). Note in this context the significance of Cummins' point quoted earlier 'Transfer is more likely to occur from minority to majority language *because of the*

greater exposure to literacy in the majority language outside of school and the strong social pressure to learn it' (emphasis added). To an unknown extent, therefore, during pupils' early years in an IRF all-Irish school context, someone outside the school has to ensure that English reading skills develop.

Another issue about the optimal sequence of reading instruction was raised by Cummins many years ago in the context of Irish immersion. While at the time (1976) the number of all-Irish schools was much smaller than it is today, the issue is as relevant now as it was then. The context was a study of beginning reading instruction in the child's second language (Irish). The title of Cummins' article in the *Canadian Modern Language Review* indicates his message: 'Delaying native language reading instruction in immersion programs: A cautionary note.' Cummins' point arises from the reasons which teachers gave for favouring the introduction of reading in the home language prior to the second language in all-Irish schools:

> *A large number of teachers also stressed the possible motivational consequences of holding a child back from a skill he is ready to learn. These teachers argued that many children could recognise a sizeable number of English words before coming to school and consequently had more interest in learning to read in that language. …In short, many teachers felt that the introduction of reading instruction in L2 would fail to stimulate the child's interest in reading and might have long-term detrimental consequences for his motivation to read* (Cummins, 1976, p. 47).

Cummins argues that at Grades 1 and 2, for example, the child's L2 skills are not sufficiently developed for him to widely explore the different reading materials which may be appropriate for his cognitive level. Thus, his L2 reading experiences may not stimulate an interest in reading to the same extent as L1 reading experiences might. Cummins also makes the point that delaying L1 reading instruction may not have these undesirable motivational consequences in cases where parents 'fill the gap left by the school.' The rapid transfer of reading skills from L2 reading to L1 skills in immersion generally may in part be a function of parental involvement in the reading process. He suggests that 'until we discover to what extent parents do promote L1 reading few generalisations can be made regarding the optimal sequencing of reading instruction in

immersion programs' (Cummins, 1976, p. 48).[12] But what happens if support of this kind is not available in the case of particular schools, or if the home needs support from the school itself or from other agencies in this regard?[13]

A crucially problematical issue about using the linguistic interdependence principle to determine strategy regarding the sequencing of reading instruction in a particular immersion school context is that it is extremely difficult to be sure about the direction of effects at all. Even where the school successfully introduces reading in L2 before L1, we cannot be sure that the early rate of progress in L2 reading is not determined by basic literacy skills/readiness *already acquired in L1*, or by the success of *the ongoing transfer of skills by the child between L1 and L2 arising from reading outside school*. In other words, we have no way of knowing at present whether, or to what extent, what we might call the 'L1 loop' is actually the basic engine of progress in children's acquisition of reading skills *even in L2*, in those cases where L2 reading is introduced before L1 at school. This is ultimately a question to be determined by research. Because of the range of early reading practices in different all-Irish schools, they provide an exceptionally useful natural laboratory for studying the issues. Indeed, research here could make a major contribution to the international literature on the subject of the optimal sequencing of the introduction of L1 and L2 reading in different immersion contexts.

11. Parental involvement

Given that the growth of immersion generally, including all-Irish schools, has been parent-led, and that parents and the home are considered central to the early development of reading (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993; Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2004), it is surprising just how little detailed information is available on how immersion parents contribute to their children's early acquisition of literacy or how they

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[12] Although not directly relevant to the Irish-context, it is notable that Cummins has expressed concern about the relatively extreme 'pattern of resistance to the teaching of English in full-immersion Maori-medium contexts' (May & Hill, 2005) and has questioned how readily academic skills may be expected to transfer across languages if reading in the home language is not developed: 'The rationale is that the minority language (Maori) needs maximum reinforcement and transfer of academic skills to English will happen 'automatically' without formal instruction. Although there may be instances where this does happen, in my view, this assumption is seriously flawed. 'Automatic' transfer of academic skills across languages will not happen unless students are given opportunities to read and write extensively in English in addition to the minority language'(Cummins, 2000b:194).

[13] For a very useful review of educational disadvantage and reading literacy both in Ireland and more generally, see Eivers, Shiel & Shortt (2004).

try to complement the work of the school. Ideally, the formulation of policy about early reading and the introduction of the home language should be based on detailed information about:

a. the manner in which parents, either directly or indirectly, seek to promote their children's acquisition of reading skills in Irish and English and
b. parents' understanding is of how their own efforts relate to the school's strategy concerning the sequencing of early reading and their level of trust and confidence in the school's strategy.

Likewise, it would be useful to know how all-Irish schools themselves view the contribution of parents in these early years, and how well the school's view matches that of the parents about these matters. Finally, information is needed on how school and parent views on the contribution of the home vary within the all-Irish sector; how these variations relate to the kind of socioeconomic, sociolinguistic and educational variables discussed earlier (see Sections 6 and 8); and how the views of parents in the all-Irish sector about these matters compare to the views of parents in the ordinary mainstream schools sector.

12. A flexible approach to sequencing L1 and L2 reading at school and pupil level?

Is it possible that the all-Irish sector's entirely legitimate goal/strategy to establish Irish as the language of the school could be reconciled with flexibility regarding initial reading instruction? The compromise strategy in question would consist of starting off reading in Irish, but reverting to English reading instruction if difficulties develop. This approach would have the merit of allowing schools who were marginally leaning towards either IRF or ERF strategies to steer a middle course, committing themselves generally to entirely Irish-medium instruction initially, but retaining the option of abandoning this policy in the case of individual children or groups of children. The question is whether this is a practicable approach within the classroom in terms of the organisation and management of teaching, and more generally in the school in terms of formulating a clear policy. Cummins (2000a) appears to think the approach has merits, though he does not appear to spell out whether he is talking about a strategy of flexibility to be applied at the *individual-pupil level* or at the *class/school level*. He refers

to a Japanese immersion context in which reading instruction, as in the case of ERF schools, begins *as a matter of routine* in the majority language:

An implication of the interdependence principle is that children who are experiencing difficulties in the early stages of a French immersion program might be helped by encouraging the two-way transfer of skills across languages. In other words, if students are slow in learning to read through French (L2), it makes sense to promote literacy development in their stronger language (English) and work for transfer to their weaker language after they have made the initial breakthrough into literacy.

In this regard it is noteworthy that the Katoh Gakuen program has the same proportion of L1 language arts instruction in the early grades as do other Japanese (non-immersion) schools. This appears as a very appropriate strategy both in view of the increased possibilities for promoting literacy across languages and also the specific challenges of developing literacy in a character-based language such as Japanese (Cummins, 2000a, p.6).

13. Some differences between Canadian and Irish immersion: Implications for the relevance of Canadian reading-sequencing strategy

The second important argument favouring the introduction of reading in L2 before L1 in Irish immersion is the fact that this is the general practice in Canadian immersion and that it appears to reliably produce successful reading in both languages. While Canadian practice in this respect, of course, validates the approach of IRF all-Irish schools, a key question is whether, at the same time, it represents a significant challenge to the different approach in ERF schools. The argument to be made here is that practice in Canada in this area *does not undermine* the strategy of those all-Irish schools that introduce reading in English first. Generalising directly from other immersion contexts in relation to an issue such as this is always going to be fraught with difficulties. But there are two crucial differences between Canadian and Irish immersion which are relevant to the early reading sequencing question and which should make us particularly cautious about generalising Canadian practice to the Irish situation:

a. the fact that the attrition rate in immersion is very high in Canada (compared to all Irish schools) and

b. that unlike the situation in all-Irish schools, which are whole-school immersion 'centres,' immersion programmes in Canada often consist of streams within an English speaking school.

From the beginning, early French immersion has been characterised by relatively high rates of student drop-out from programmes due either to academic or behavioural problems (Cummins, 2000a). In the province of Alberta between 1983-84 and 1990-91, for example, attrition rates from immersion ranged from 43% to 68% by grade 6, 58% to 83% by grade 9, and 88% to 97% by grade 12 (Keep, 1993). While detailed data on all-Irish schools are not available, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that attrition from Irish immersion is nothing like this. One implication of the Alberta data is that Canadian practice on the effects of introducing reading in the second language before the first language, and the research evidence about later reading achievement based on that practice, actually relates *only to those pupils who remain in immersion after a very substantial process of attrition*. Pupils who opt out of Canadian immersion do not contribute to the research findings concerning the impact of reading sequencing. In contrast, what we see in Irish immersion, whether we are talking about sequencing strategy or reading achievement, are academic results based on *populations of pupils who have stayed in immersion without any significant attrition*. To that extent, statements about the success of pupils in transferring reading skills from L2 to L1 in Canadian immersion, and their implications for Irish immersion generally, must be qualified in important ways that they often are not.

The second difference between Canadian immersion and all-Irish schools which may have implications for the emergent reading issue, is that in Canadian schools with an immersion programme, those in which the programme consists of *just one French-medium stream* far outnumber those in which *the entire school is an immersion centre.* Cummins (2000a) attributes this general tendency to the difficulties which would arise if an entire neighbourhood school was devoted to French-medium education - parents who wanted their children in the English programme would have to send them to a less convenient school. Because dropping out of a Canadian immersion programme usually means simply switching streams within the same school, dropping out is neither as big a decision, nor as big a trauma for the child (and parent), as it might be in an Irish

44

context (where all-Irish schools are invariably immersion centres rather than streams).[14]

Choosing to send a child to an all-Irish *school* is in some respects, therefore, a larger educational decision, both for parent and child, than choosing an L2 immersion *stream* within an otherwise English-medium school. It also means that in the Irish case, once children arrive for the first time in school, the universally-felt responsibility of schools and teachers to accommodate the varying academic needs of pupils *within the school* will be synonymous in the case of an all-Irish school with the obligation *to accommodate these needs within an immersion environment.* Switching to an English stream within the same school if difficulties are encountered is not an option for those individual pupils who may find particular aspects of 'conventional' immersion programmes challenging. To put it another way, Irish immersion may often have to 'stretch' more than Canadian immersion to accommodate a wide range of pupils. It follows, of course, that within Irish immersion, issues such as the early introduction of the home language, and the sequencing of early reading, may be weightier ones for teachers and parents, and may demand a more flexible response from teachers and schools, than they might elsewhere.

14. Do ERF schools represent an undesirable departure from immersion orthodoxy or an adaptive innovation by Irish immersion?

Does the early reading sequencing strategy of ERF all-Irish schools represent a sensible, appropriate accommodation to challenges that, in the different context of Canadian immersion schools, may be accommodated by the higher attrition rate (i.e. by students who are experiencing difficulties arising in whole or in part from the language- and reading-sequencing strategy switching out of the immersion stream into the regular stream)? While it is an empirical question, if the answer should turn out to be 'yes' it would imply that ERF all-Irish schools may be succeeding in keeping children within L2 immersion who might otherwise (in an IRF-type school or in Canadian French immersion) transfer out of it over time. To that extent, the ERF strategy might be seen as optimum in terms of promoting Irish-medium education in a wide range of different

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[14] While it is incidental to the discussion here, it may be noted that expressive skills in the second language tend to develop better where the entire school is an immersion centre rather than when immersion is confined to a stream within a majority language school (Cummins, 2000a).

local populations of children, while at the same time stretching immersion conventions to maximise the promotion of literacy.

None of this, of course, implies that there are not important questions to be asked about the consequences of an ERF strategy for the establishment and maintenance of an Irish language ethos in the school. Ultimately, however, any possible disadvantages of an ERF strategy in this respect may have to be set against potential advantages related to the promotion of literacy and the provision of Irish immersion education for the broadest possible range of pupils.

The fact that practice relating to the sequencing of early reading differs from school to school (ERF or IRF) is not, in itself, evidence of a departure from optimum strategy either at the school level or nationally. *Which approach to sequencing early reading is correct?* may simply be the wrong question. There may be no one best way, no one correct strategy relating to early reading, that is appropriate for all Irish-immersion schools. Thus, pressure to resolve this apparent curricular conflict with a universal recommendation may be misguided. Such a prescription, in our present state of knowledge, might very well not be in the interests either of the future continued growth of all-Irish education or the development of literacy in children.

15. Some questions for research on emergent reading/reading in ERF and IRF all-Irish schools[15]

- Do ERF all-Irish schools accommodate a greater range of pupils (in terms of social and educational background) within immersion than IRF all- Irish schools do?
- Are schools that adopt ERF attracting pupils with a different socioeconomic, home background profile to IRF schools?
- Do ERF all-Irish schools provide immersion for pupils who might otherwise (i.e. if they were attending IRF all-Irish schools) transfer out of immersion as so many Canadian pupils appear to?
- What is the level of attrition in ERF and IRF all-Irish schools?

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[15] No attempt is made here to specify a research approach for investigating these issues but it does seem that quantitative research based on a representative sample of all Irish-medium schools, complemented by more qualitative studies carried out within selected schools, would be most informative for the development of policy.

- Is there any evidence that the existing reading instruction policy in ERF schools is detrimental to (i) pupils' acquisition of literacy and proficiency in speaking the language and (ii) the use of Irish in the school more generally?

- How is the use of English circumscribed during the early years of ERF all-Irish education?

- How do ERF and IRF all-Irish schools compare in terms of achievement/ proficiency in Irish generally and in Irish and English reading? (See the discussion in Section 6 above of data on between-school variance in Irish proficiency based on the Harris et al, 2006 study). Can variations in speaking proficiency and reading achievement between the two kinds of schools be linked to (a) early reading sequencing and (b) socioeconomic, sociolinguistic and home background variables?

- To what extent do immersion schools here (ERF or IRF) produce similar levels of language skills to those in Canada?

- Do parents have different perceptions of ERF and IRF all-Irish schools? Do they feel there are differences in the kind of children who are capable of benefiting from each kind of school? How are parental queries regarding the suitability of immersion for all children handled in different all-Irish schools? How is policy on early reading and related issues decided in newly founded all-Irish schools and what role do parents have in the evolution of that policy?

- What are the views of teachers and parents in the all-Irish sector on the present balance nationally between IRF and ERF all-Irish schools? Is the present balance in the best interests of the growth of immersion in Ireland? Would an attempt to change practices in particular schools be (a) desirable (b) possible?

- How will the all-Irish sector grow and what is the *likely* future balance between IRF and ERF all-Irish schools as the sector expands? What pedagogic and school policy issues will arise as all-Irish schools become more and more mainstream in terms of the socioeconomic, educational and linguistic profile of parents?

- If home and parental input are critical in promoting the acquisition of literacy skills, what consultation processes and mechanisms are presently used in all-Irish schools to involve and inform parents regarding their children's reading in L1 and L2? Are there differences between ERF and IRF all-Irish schools in the kind of support for reading provided by parents?

There are many other questions - apart from early literacy acquisition - about the place of the home language within immersion which a major programme of research might answer. Cummins (2000a) points out, for example, that one common weakness of immersion schools from an educational point of view is that, in the effort to maintain the L2 ethos, classrooms often become more teacher-centred than non-immersion classrooms. Cooperative learning and project-based strategies tend to be avoided in immersion because teachers worry that these activities may prompt pupils to begin using English in class and in the school environment more generally. Cummins suggests, however, that it may be worthwhile relaxing conventions so that, under certain circumstances, pupils would be free to use L1 for pupil-pupil discussions but be required to report back to the class in L2. It would be a significant contribution to the future development of Irish immersion to establish all-Irish teachers' views on issues such as these and to ascertain whether, and to what extent, the circumscribed use of English is permitted in the context of cooperative learning at present. It would also be very useful to determine the effect that this kind of limited use of English by pupils has on the use of Irish more generally in the school.

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