

## **IRISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A SURVEY OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS\***

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A sample of Irish primary teachers (N 125) responded in structured interviews concerning their perceptions of the relationships of Irish language teaching to (i) educational policy related to the Irish language, (ii) learners (iii) long range benefits to learners as adults (iv) sources and quality of parent support and (v) teacher preparation. Lack of a commonly accepted goal for teaching the language was evident, but new curriculum recommendations on time allocation were generally observed. The lack of a common goal was also reflected in reactions to organization and policy proposals. Teachers preference was for greater emphasis on conversational development than curriculum guidelines suggest. Immediate and long range benefits to learners were ill-defined and tangible parental support was perceived as frequently absent. Pre-service training was seen as the sole preparation for teaching Irish for most teachers. In-service up-dating was infrequently mentioned as being of assistance.

In Ireland, since its independence, the schools have been the major vehicle in an attempt to develop bilingualism. English is spoken by the majority of the population, but Irish serves as a symbol of national identity, and, in time, it is hoped it will serve more widely as a means of communication. In undertaking the present study, the author hoped that an examination of the Irish experiment in the development of bilingualism through the schools might generate data applicable to such questions as How does a programme of dual language teaching influence school organization and curriculum? Are there learning problems in the child's first language which are generated by simultaneous instruction in a second language? What have been the benefits to learners as adults from their learning a second language in school? To what extent do parents support the programme? How are teachers prepared to teach a second language?

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Teachers were seen to be the people most directly involved in the realities of bilingual education. Thus the perceptions of teachers of the relationship of Irish language teaching to the above questions was thought to have the potential of furthering the development of guidelines for other bilingual programme proposals.

Although by constitutional provision Irish is the first official language of the state, only a small minority of the society use it for ordinary communication. In 1971, McNamara (5) estimated that only three percent of the school going population used Irish as a home language. The *Language Attitudes Report* noted that 'for the great majority of people school is the only occasion during their lives in which they use Irish at all' (2, p. 71). While street signs, notices and government documents are printed in both English and Irish, most government business, including legislation and judicial activity, is conducted in English. Streib (7, p. 73) has observed

Patterned evasion in the use of Irish is a pragmatic way to handle the attempted restoration of the language for it permits the retention of the language as a symbol of nationhood without altering the daily patterns of communication.

The new *Primary school curriculum* (3) issued by the Department of Education in 1971 specifies five hours per week (three and one-half hours for the youngest pupil) to be devoted to the teaching of the Irish language. In addition, specific objectives are set for each grade and recommendations for techniques and teaching materials are provided. In other parts of the curriculum, emphasis is also placed on possible uses of Irish within the various subject areas. Varied points of view on the proportion of school time which should be devoted to the teaching of Irish are easily found. Comhairle na Gaeilge (1) in 1974 was concerned that the new curriculum recommendations might be regarded as maxima. Since Macnamara (4) reported in a 1966 study that 42% of school time was devoted to Irish in the first six years of school, the 20% of school time recommended in the new curriculum would represent a distinct reduction. Comhairle na Gaeilge (1) advocated an expansion of all Irish schools, lamented their enrolment decline and questioned the value of Irish medium streams as a replacement. Criticism was made of the deletion of Irish from the Leaving Certificate requirements, teacher competency in Irish, the standard of school achievement in Irish, the lack of textbooks in Irish, teacher methods and teacher training.

The *Report* of the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (2) described a major survey of the general public in Ireland. Questions were asked concerning attitudes toward Irish, Irish language ability and Irish language usage. Particularly relevant to the present study were portions of the *Report* which concerned parental support in assisting children to learn Irish, teachers' use of Irish and public attitudes towards the restoration of Irish, and towards Irish as a school subject. According to the *Report*, 75 to 80% of Irish people favoured the restoration of Irish and supported its continued teaching in the school system. The support, it was emphasized, was generally not for replacement of English, but for the building of a linguistic situation in which English and Irish were equally important. The remaining 20 to 25% of the population were clearly not supportive.

Although the majority favoured the teaching of Irish in the schools, they believed that children doing subjects in Irish do not do as well as those doing them in English, that most children resent having to do Irish, that too many children fail examinations because of Irish, and that children seldom learn enough Irish to use it after school. They also believed that students take Irish in order to pass examinations rather than to develop conversational fluency and that school curricula are primarily developed to prepare children for examinations. A major conclusion from the *Report* treated the school and home as factors basic to the societal goal of English-Irish bilingualism:

As is clear from our data, the main agency outside the Gaeltacht for building up competence in Irish is the school. It is also clear from the data that the build-up of Irish in the home and the parental support for Irish are crucial contributory elements in this process (2, p. 318).

Parental behaviour in this crucial area, however, reportedly revealed infrequent use of Irish in the home with children. Thus it was unusual for children to have an adult model of Irish-speaking behaviour outside the school environment. In addition, parental help with homework was infrequent due to lack of interest or proficiency, or both. At the same time, the adult population was reported to be generally critical of the schools' approach to this task.

Teachers' responses in the *Report* showed a similar low level of usage to that of other adults with Irish-speaking competency. Since the society has placed most of the language revival burden on teachers, the following finding from the *Report* is relevant:

there is little evidence that teachers have assumed a role wider than what their work context implies in their fostering of Irish as a more common medium of communication (2, p 198)

The present study investigated teachers' perceptions of the effects of teaching Irish in schools and their viewpoints regarding (i) operative and proposed educational policy related to the Irish language, (ii) effects of Irish language teaching on learners, (iii) long range benefits to adults who had studied Irish, (iv) sources and quality of parental support and (v) teacher training as a means of assisting them in their Irish language teaching function

#### METHOD -

##### *Sample*

A sample of 125 primary teachers from 32 national schools in the Republic participated in the survey. This number represented approximately 75% of national primary teachers. In the selection of schools, an attempt was made to adhere to proportions reported by the Department of Education in 1971 in terms of school size, urban-rural town distribution and religious orientation. Another factor in selection was representation of schools serving a variety of socio-economic pupil populations and linguistic traditions. Choice of specific schools representative of the several categories was made in consultation with members of the staff of St Patrick's College, Dublin and with school administrators. Participants were teaching in 11

TABLE 1  
NUMBER OF TEACHERS INTERVIEWED

Location	English medium		Type of School		Gaeltacht <sup>2</sup>	Total
	Catholic	Other	Irish-medium <sup>1</sup>	Catholic		
Dublin Area	28	6		12		46
Other Urban	35					35
Town	9	5				14
Rural	20				10	30
Total	92	11	12		10	125

1 Due to small numbers in these categories no attempt was made to provide for location variables

2 Rural Irish-speaking areas

counties, including the five cities of Dublin, Dun Laoghaire, Waterford, Cork and Limerick. As can be seen in Table 1, teachers in All Irish and Gaeltacht schools were intentionally over represented in that they constituted ten percent and eight percent, respectively, of the sample population. Since these schools were the sole users of Irish as an instructional medium, it was felt that enough teachers from such schools should be included to allow for a reasonably representative set of their viewpoints in a study related to Irish in education. In schools of four or fewer teachers, all teachers were interviewed. In schools with five to seven teachers, the principal referred the investigator to three teachers. In larger schools, six teachers of the principal's selection were interviewed. No criteria for teacher interview referral were given to the principals.

#### *Procedure*

Personal interview was selected as the medium for data collection. Since the central emphasis was on teacher perception, the interview had several advantages: assurance of confidentiality, opportunity to clarify possible ambiguity or misinterpretation, opportunity for the respondent to amplify or explain responses, ease of response since no writing was required of the subject, and desired proportional representation could be assured since returns were not left to chance. Since all interviews were personally conducted by the investigator, uniformity of administration of the interview protocol was high. Positive attitudes and openness of response (in surprising variety) confirmed the value of selection of the interview medium.

A protocol consisting of 21 questions was developed in order to provide a structure for data collection on teacher perceptions. The areas investigated were (i) operative and proposed educational policies on Irish language, (ii) effect on the learner of Irish, (iii) adult use of Irish, (iv) parental support and (v) teacher training in the teaching of Irish. The questions comprising the protocol were extensively revised with the help of the Irish educators and researchers.

Fifteen minutes was the minimum time needed to administer the instrument, but most subjects took longer since they took time to reflect and often voluntarily extended and explained their responses. All were given the option of 'no response' on any items upon which they had no viewpoint or chose not to express one. A frequent comment by teachers was 'I'm glad you asked these questions because I hadn't thought enough about them before.' Responses were recorded during the interviews. Many

of the items called for unstructured responses making it necessary for the investigator to categorize them for tabulation

## RESULTS

### *Operative and proposed educational policies on Irish language*

The current policy of requiring the study of Irish by all primary pupils was opposed by 66% of teachers surveyed. On being asked which pupils should be exempted, 83% of the opponents mentioned children with low achievement in language skills. Parent objection was cited by a further 7%, and eight other possible causes for exemption were suggested. Thirty four per cent of the respondents said that if the study of Irish were made optional, the language would die out. Comments ranged from 'It's dying out anyway' to 'Taking out the compulsion would make it more attractive'. Even though the majority said they would make exceptions to the requirement of Irish study for all, 69% advocated that Irish competency at a conversational level should be a required part of the Leaving Certificate.

A suggested alternative to all-Irish schools has been the provision of Irish medium streams in large English speaking schools. A plurality of 49% supported while 46% opposed the proposal. Opposition to streaming on principle was voiced by some teachers, while others felt it was organizationally impractical. Many of those favouring the Irish medium stream concept emphasized that their approval was based on the provision of a genuine option.

Another proposal often heard is that one or more subjects be taught through Irish. Sixty five percent rejected this idea while 34% approved it. Those in favour were asked which subject(s) they would recommend. Most frequently mentioned were Irish, History and Geography (62%), music and art (24%) and physical education (14%). Six other subjects or combinations were suggested. When those who approved the teaching of a subject in Irish were asked the expected effect on mastery of skills and concepts on the subject(s) they had recommended, 55% felt that the subject matter would be reinforced by being taught through Irish, while 33% felt that there would be no difference. Four other possible outcomes were mentioned.

A Comhairle na Gaeilge publication (1) reported a sharp decline in All Irish schools' enrolment. Asked to explain this development, respondents mentioned 35 factors or combinations of factors. Most often cited were

lack of parental interest (24%), Irish not needed in daily life (23%) and interference with other studies (14%) Some respondents expressed surprise at the enrolment decline, citing new all Irish schools in Dublin Often, however, teachers in other areas recognized the above factors as having resulted in curtailed or defunct all Irish programmes in their localities

The new *Primary school curriculum* (3) requirement that a minimum allocation of five hours per week be made to the study of Irish was seen as being generally observed in the opinion of 74% of the sample, as being exceeded by 6% and as not being observed by 17% of respondents Asked to rate the adequacy of this time requirement, 62% found it to be adequate, 12% felt it was inadequate, and 25% felt that too much time was devoted to the subject Respondents were then asked if less time were to be devoted to the teaching of Irish, how they felt the additional time available for other subjects should be allocated Thirty subjects or combinations of subjects were named Most frequently mentioned were English and reading (33%), environmental studies (19%), the arts (19%), social studies, (17%) and mathematics (14%)

Given a choice in selection of an emphasis in their teaching of Irish, teachers in this study (91%) indicated a preference for conversational development in Irish None would emphasise grammar and 9% would teach the language as an incidental element in a programme of Irish studies

#### *Effect of Irish on the learner*

Asked if in the early stages of reading and writing, children have difficulty in their first language as a result of learning a second language, 50% of teachers reported conflicts in sound symbol correspondence Language conflicts were also perceived in spelling (31%), in language structure (40%) and in oral language development (26%) The teaching of the Irish language was perceived as increasing learners' interest and understanding of Irish culture and heritage by 60% of the teachers, 24% saw it as having no impact

#### *Adult use of Irish*

Since education is to a large extent a preparation for the future, teachers were asked questions relating to the value of Irish in adult life These dealt with adult use of Irish, lack of current publications in Irish and perceived benefits to the adult Irish speaker The most frequently mentioned conjectures within the thirty response patterns regarding reasons for adult

non use were not needed in daily life (42%), lack of proficiency or confidence (25%), resentment of compulsion (18%), lack of interest (13%) and school emphasis on written Irish (12%)

The teaching of reading in Irish is an important part of the school curriculum. Respondents were therefore asked what effect the lack of current publication of books and periodicals in Irish had on their views of the value of teaching Irish in school. Twenty-eight percent felt that the lack of publication affected their feelings about teaching the language, while 70% said it did not.

The adult Irish speaker was deemed by 88% of respondents to have a vocational advantage primarily in teaching, and in the civil service by 74%. Some benefit was predicted for the Irish speaker's potential ability to develop interests in cultural areas such as literature and folklore (76%), music (58%) and drama (31%). While 26% of the teachers saw no intellectual benefit to the study of Irish, 50% believed that there were benefits to the study of any second language and 25% mentioned cultural identity. Potential adult use of Irish in a social context was seen by 51% of the respondents as most likely to occur at Irish cultural events and during Gaeltacht visits. Little or no social utility of the language was expected by 33%.

#### *Parental Support*

A key issue frequently mentioned in the study of Irish is parental encouragement of children. With respect to the parents of children they had in class, strongly positive or positive support was perceived by 33% of the teachers in the present study. Forty seven percent reported mixed support or apathy. Negative or strongly negative parent reaction was perceived by 18%. In interpreting these figures, it should be noted that all-Irish and Gaeltacht teachers reported 82% of their parents as strongly positive or positive in contrast to English medium teachers, who reported only 24% of their parents in the same categories.

Those who indicated the presence of positive or mixed parental support were asked how assistance was given to children at home. Parental help with homework was reported by 55%, while 46% mentioned speaking Irish at home to some degree. The same percentage mentioned interest and encouragement as a factor. These activities, along with Gaeltacht visits (12%), were often reported in combination.

### *Teacher Training*

Respondents were asked what special preparation teachers receive in training college or from in service programmes to assist them in teaching Irish. Most teachers considered their preparation limited to pre service experiences. Special methods courses were mentioned by 43% of the sample. Thirty-three percent considered that having had their training in Irish was their major preparation. Twenty-one percent felt that the emphasis on increasing their own proficiency in Irish was helpful and 28% mentioned Gaeltacht visits. Twelve percent identified summer courses or other in service activity as a factor in assisting their teaching of Irish. An equal number perceived no training as helpful before or after they began teaching.

### DISCUSSION

A limitation of the present study was that it dealt with teachers' perceptions rather than with more objective data that might have been obtained through observation or testing. Furthermore, restricted sample size and the fact that only 11 counties were visited tend to limit applicability of the findings. This is particularly relevant to data from the sub groups of teachers in Gaeltacht, all Irish and other than Catholic schools. As in any study employing an interviewing technique, misinterpretations of responses may have occurred, although respondents were allowed to read entries during and after recording. A further possibility of error may have been present in the investigator's grouping of essentially similar responses into a given category.

Granting the above limitations, the writer feels that the interview technique was most useful for development of perceptual data in that replies were unstructured, ambiguities were usually resolved on the spot by both questioner and respondent and rapport was developed which resulted in open expression. The varied opinions expressed among individual staff members within most schools suggest that neither greater numbers nor wider geographic scope would have significantly changed the results.

Controversy on language policy in Irish society is well documented in the literature, most recently in the *Report* of the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (2). In the schools, reflection of the controversy is evident in concern for time devoted to the teaching of Irish and concern for lack of time and attention to other parts of the curriculum. Questions on school organization at times seemed to raise an additional question: are schools to be organized primarily to teach Irish?

The writer, in his conversations with the teachers, formed the opinion that most teachers had a warm feeling for the language. By an overwhelming margin (91%), the teachers sampled agreed with the majority of *Report* (2) respondents that a conversational emphasis should be a key feature of school programmes in Irish. Another parallel was the acceptance by teachers of the inclusion of Irish as part of the curriculum for most children in national schools. There were clear-cut objectives as defined in the primary school curriculum (3), but also great confusion among teachers as to goals for the Irish language programme. A Dublin teacher put it this way, 'I love to teach Irish, but I really don't know why I'm teaching it.'

Teachers in the sample differed widely in their perceptions of the dual language programme as a cause of conflict in the learning of language related skills in English. In talking with children, looking at written work, and listening to reading in all Irish and Gaeltacht schools, the writer, however, found little to suggest that Irish *per se* conflicted with development of English language skills. Teachers in such schools confirmed this viewpoint. Further controlled research is needed to generate data on interlanguage learning conflicts.

Teacher perceptions of adult non use of Irish, and the reasons for non use, were consistent with those found in the *Report* of the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (2). While a number of potential adult uses of Irish were mentioned in the course of the interviews, the writer had the feeling, reinforced by frequent teacher remarks, that relatively few teachers expected that their pupils would make any use of the language once they had taken examinations and left school. The lack of need for adult use of Irish and the consequent failure of students to maintain school acquired skills has been perceived as a problem in motivation. O Cathain (6) has observed that the difficulty in schools 'does not lie so much in teaching them *how* to speak Irish as inducing them to *want* to speak it.' It was thought in the present study that those who developed a particular interest in Irish culture and heritage might find fluency to be helpful. Here again, one finds a problem in goal or value orientation. Why should Irish occupy approximately one fifth of the national school curriculum if the learners are unlikely to use it as adults?

As might have been expected, teacher perceptions of parent levels of support for the teaching of Irish closely paralleled the findings of the *Report* (2) in respect to the type of home encouragement of children

learning Irish in school. While 75 to 80% of the society were reported as supportive of the language, only 34% of the teachers felt that parents of their pupils were positively supportive, and 21% found mixed parental support. To some extent, the teacher experience may be due to the reportedly critical societal view of the way Irish is taught in the schools. In any case, the lack of generally positive parental support increases the difficulty of the teachers' task.

Teacher preparation for the instruction of children in Irish was largely limited to initial college training. Although recent graduates were more likely to mention it, less than half reported that they had had any special training in methods, curriculum or goals for teaching Irish. The emphasis in their training had been on speaking and writing in the language. Only 12% of the sample listed summer or in-service work as part of their preparation in language teaching. National school teachers of Irish have, therefore, had relatively little exposure to recent developments in second language teaching, the optimum use of new materials and the development of a current rationale for the teaching of the language.

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