The Irish Journal of Education, 1982, *xvi* 2, pp 85 116

ACHIEVEMENT IN SPOKEN IRISH AT THE END OF PRIMARY SCHOOL*

John Harris†
Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann

A criterion referenced test of spoken Irish based on the curriculum for fifth and sixth standards in national schools was administered to pupils in a national sample of classes (n=119) at the end of the sixth standard The test was designed to assess whether pupils had mastered each of 16 speaking and listening objectives of the *Nuachursaí (Cursaí Comhra Gaeilge)* for these standards Fourteen of the objectives were mastered by less than 50% of pupils Objectives which did not involve a precise knowledge of morphology and syntax (e g , sound discrimination', 'pronunciation', 'general comprehension of speech', and 'fluency of oral description') were the ones most frequently mastered More girls than boys mastered each of the objectives

Spoken Irish holds a central position in the primary school curriculum and its study occupies a substantial proportion of the time of both pupils and teachers (29) The teaching of spoken Irish also has a high level of support (76%) from the general population (7) It comes as a surprise, then, to realise just how little is actually known about the success achieved by pupils in this area No objective test information is available on speaking and listening skills in Irish, the stability of achievement in these areas from year to year, or the factors which may affect achievement A project

* I am indebted to the inspectors of the Primary Branch of the Department of Education who administered all the tests in this survey and to members of the Department s Curriculum Unit, particularly Donall O Coileain, Breandan O Cronin, and Breandan O Conghealaigh, who consulted with us regularly I am also grateful to Patricia Fontes, Michael O Martin, and Ronan Reilly, of the Educational Research Centre who made important contributions to the statistical analyses The project would not have been completed without the assistance of Tomas O Domhnallain, former Director of I T E Diarmaid De Nais, Martina Hickey, and Lelia Murtagh Responsibility for the analyses and views reported in this paper is entirely my own

† Requests for off prints should be sent to John Harris Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann, 31 Fitzwilliam Place Dublin 2

conducted by Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann with the assistance and co-operation of the Department of Education and the Educational Research Centre between 1978 and 1982 goes some way towards remedying this situation The project involved the development of a series of criterion referenced tests based on the speaking and listening objectives of the primary school conversation courses, the *Nuachursai* (e g , 20) These tests were administered to pupils in representative national samples of second, fourth, and sixth-grade classes At some grade levels, additional information about teaching and attitudes to Irish was also collected In the present paper one of these tests – *Bealtriail Ghaeilge I T E VI* – is described and the results of a national survey in which it was used are reported The data presented relate to the speaking and listening skills in Irish of pupils who were approaching the end of their primary education

In reviewing the available evidence on achievement in Irish, data relating to both primary and post-primary levels are considered Studies providing information on general achievement, achievement in reading, as well as achievement in spoken or conversational Irish are included The evidence to be examined is of five general kinds teachers' perceptions, parents' perceptions, pupil self-assessment, pupil performance on standardized tests, and pupil performance in public examinations

In two studies, it was found that parents and teachers perceived more pupils either experiencing difficulty or making less satisfactory progress in Irish than in arithmetic/mathematics or English In one of these, teachers were asked to indicate if they perceived specified 11 year old pupils as having difficulty with the three subjects The percentage of pupils regarded as experiencing difficulty with Irish was 50%, with arithmetic 48%, and with English 25% (22) In the second study, the perceptions of a national sample of parents of primary and post primary pupils were obtained and the same order of difficulty of subjects was revealed (26) Parents of primary-school pupils, however, tended to perceive less pupil difficulty with each of the school subjects than did the teachers in the earlier study (22) The percentage of parents who regarded their child ren's progress as fair or poor was 33% for Irish reading, 29% for arithmetic, and 15% for English reading Parents of post primary school children perceived more pupil difficulty than did parents of primary school child ren, the former's perceptions being closer to those of the primary school teachers

Three later studies based on the perceptions of primary school teachers

focus on changes in standards of achievement over time rather than on relative pupil difficulty in different subjects In one of these, a national sample of teachers between the ages of 35 and 55 was asked to compare the general standard of proficiency in Irish achieved by pupils completing grades 5/6 at that time with the standard achieved ten years earlier More teachers thought that standards were worse (48%) than thought they were better (39%) while 13% thought they were unchanged (29) The Irish National Teachers Organisation, in a national survey of members in 1976, asked teachers about the standards attained by pupils during the previous five years Slightly more teachers thought that standards in oral Irish had declined (42%) than thought they had improved (36%), while 14% perceived no change, and 8% had no opinion Standards in Irish spelling and, to a lesser extent, in Irish writing were also perceived by more teachers to have declined than to have improved Standards of Irish reading, however, were perceived by more teachers as improving (42%) than declining (19%) (21) In a survey conducted by the Department of Education at about the same time, primary school principals were asked to record the perceptions of senior and junior school teachers At junior level, more teachers thought standards in oral Irish had improved (51%) than thought they had declined (31%) At senior level, however, slightly more teachers thought standards in oral Irish had declined (38%) than thought they had improved (34%) Most teachers at both junior (72%) and senior (69%) levels perceived standards of Irish reading as having improved Standards of creative and functional writing in Irish were also seen as having improved while the presentation of written work was thought to have declined (9) Two factors need to be taken into account in drawing general conclusions from these three studies First, one of them deals with senior primary grades only, a second deals with all primary grades together, while the third deals separately with senior and junior primary grades Second, evidence for an overall decline or improvement in standards should be based on the magnitude and direction of the difference between the percentages of teachers who perceived an improvement and the percentages who perceived a decline Bearing these points in mind, it seems that, on balance, teachers perceived a relatively small decline in standards of oral Irish or general proficiency in Irish at senior grades but an improvement at junior grades Irish reading was perceived as having improved at both senior and junior grades Irish spelling was perceived as having declined, while the situation regarding writing in Irish is unclear

In one study, standardized tests were used to examine changes in

achievement in Irish reading between 1973 and 1977 Standards of achievement in Irish reading in a national sample of schools (excluding schools in Irish speaking areas) were found to have declined slightly at sixth grade in primary school and in first year and second year in post-primary school but not at third, fourth, and fifth grades in primary school (11) These results seem to represent standards of Irish reading less favourably than do the perceptions of teachers (9), although the fact that the periods to which the two kinds of data refer only partly overlap makes a direct comparison impossible

In a survey conducted by the Committee on Language Attitudes Research in 1972 73, a national sample of first and sixth-year post-primary students in English-speaking areas rated their own ability to speak and understand Irish (6) The percentages of students who rated themselves at each of five ability levels in speaking and understanding are given in Table 1 On their own assessment, a little over a quarter of these students

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGES OF POST PRIMARY STUDENTS WITH VARYING DEGREES OF SELF-ASSESSED ABILITY IN SPEAKING AND UNDERSTANDING IRISH*

'Ability	Percentage of pupils			
	Speak		Understand	
	1st Year	6th Year	1st Year	6th Year
Only the odd word	8 3	2 6	8 4	2 7
Simple sentences	18 7	12 6	17 4	7 8
Parts of conversations	33 2	39 7	31 1	34 2
Most conversations	27 2	37 4	28 2	43 5
As good or better than English	7 3	5 7	7 9	9 0
No information/not applicable	5 3	2 1	7 1	2 7

*Source CLAR, Educational Sub Report (6) Tables 3 1 4 and 3 1 5

who had recently begun their post-primary education had a relatively low level of ability in both speaking and understanding Irish (odd word/ simple sentences). Roughly one-third assessed themselves as having what could be described as a moderate level of ability (parts of conversations), while a little more than a third regarded themselves as having a high level of ability (most conversations/as good or better than English). By the end of their post-primary education, the numbers reporting themselves as having a low level of ability had about halved again. The greatest absolute improvement, however, was in the numbers reporting themselves as having a high level of ability in understanding Irish – 53% of sixth-year students described their level of understanding as 'most conversations/as good or better than English', while only 36% of first-year students so described themselves. It scarcely needs to be said that data on self-assessed language ability must be interpreted cautiously. One unexpected outcome, for example, is the fall between first and sixth-year students in the percentage rating their speaking ability as 'as good or better than English'. Nevertheless, given the limited amount of direct evidence in this area, self-assessment data can be useful. The value of such data is likely to grow if at some future date self-assessments of language ability by post-primary students can be systematically related to more objective measures.

Finally, trends in public examination statistics may also be relevant to changes in standards of achievement in Irish. An analysis of the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examination statistics for the late 1960s and 1970s shows a gradual increase in the proportions of examination candidates either failing or not taking the Irish paper. In addition, it shows that between 1974 and 1979 the position of Irish declined relative to English in terms of the proportions taking the higher papers and the proportions failing or not taking the subjects in the examinations at all (30). The value of public examination results as an index of changes in achievement over time may be questioned, since grading standards may change from year to year (23, 40). In response to this objection, it can be argued that two of the three indices of change in achievement used in the analysis of examination statistics – proportion not taking Irish as an examination subject and proportion taking the higher paper – are not based on examination results at all. The third index, proportion failing, can be defended by pointing to the steadiness of the observed increase over a 10-year period and the unlikelihood that this was due to a hardening of marking standards. One other important point is that examination statistics, or indeed any measure based on the performance of students actually attending post-primary school, cannot be directly translated into

changes in achievement for total age groups This is because participation rates for post primary education have changed so much since the mid 1960s For example, about 70% of a chort in the mid 1970s possessed at least some post-primary qualification in Irish, while only 40% did so ten years earlier

In summary, the following conclusions can be drawn from the studies reviewed above Irish is perceived by parents and/or teachers as causing more difficulty to pupils and being associated with less satisfactory pupil progress than other subjects at both primary and post primary level By the beginning of their post-primary education, a little more than a quarter of all students assess themselves as having a low level of ability in speaking and understanding Irish During the later post primary years, the continued growth of competence in the language is more often perceived as taking the form of higher ability levels in understanding than in speaking Standards of achievement in oral Irish and reading seem to be holding up well in junior grades of the primary school in recent years Standards in senior grades of the primary school and at post primary level, however, appear to be declining These trends are reflected in teachers' perceptions, in the results of standardized reading tests, and in public examination statistics

Despite the fact that these generalizations can be made, the evidence reviewed is unsatisfactory in a number of ways For one thing, the validity and reliability of the data provided by the different studies may vary considerably In addition, the objectives and criteria against which performance was assessed in each case are unknown A related problem is that none of the studies contains a really detailed account of achieve ment in different aspects of Irish Even the norm referenced reading data only indicate in terms of group performance how relatively broad areas of achievement change over time Such data are difficult to translate into statements about the specific skills and knowledge acquired or lost over time

One of the aims of the present study was to measure pupil achievement in Irish more directly and in more detail than had previously been done To this end, a criterion-referenced test based on the speaking and listening objectives of the *Nuachursai* was developed Since the *Nuachursai* are employed in the vast majority of primary schools, they provide a familiar criterion in terms of which pupil achievement in spoken Irish can be evaluated The data presented in this paper consist of the percentages of

pupils in a representative national sample of sixth-grade classes who master the various speaking and listening objectives measured by that test

PROCEDURE

Instrument

Bealtriail Ghaeilge I T E – VI (BG–VI) is a 135 item criterion referenced test of spoken Irish based on 16 speaking and listening objectives of the fifth and sixth-grade Irish curriculum Criterion referenced tests can be described as tests which show whether an individual's performance reaches some 'absolute standard of quality' and may be contrasted with norm referenced tests which evaluate an individual's performance in terms of the performance of other individuals in a standardization group The objectives represented in the test used in the present study involve the possession of defined linguistic knowledge and the use of that knowledge in speaking and in understanding Irish The test was designed to show whether or not individual pupils or groups of pupils actually achieved mastery of these explicit objectives

Although the test was intended to measure the speaking and listening objectives of the Irish curriculum, these objectives have not been set down anywhere in a form sufficiently explicit to provide a ready made basis for developing items for a test In order to interpret the results of the present study, then, an account must be given of how the test items and the objectives they try to measure relate to the fifth and sixth grade Irish curriculum The main written sources on which the definition of objectives was based were the primary school curriculum handbook (19), and the fifth and sixth-grade *Nuachursai* handbooks (20) The Curriculum handbook contains general statements of broad objectives in relation to spoken Irish as well as a considerable amount of guidance and helpful illustrative material for the teacher The handbooks for the *Nuachursai*, which are based on a linguistic analysis of the language (18, 19, 28), contain a detailed listing of the linguistic material for the courses, as well as the classroom lessons and exercises to which pupils should be exposed

From the point of view of defining the *content* dimension of objectives, a problem with these handbooks is that none is explicit in stating how much pupils are expected to master of the linguistic material which is listed (vocabulary items, tense forms of irregular verbs, etc) and to which the pupils are exposed Neither is it specified how soon after linguistic material is first encountered in particular lessons, or at what particular

grade levels, it is expected that material should be mastered Further, in the case of some objectives, no listing of the relevant linguistic content is provided nor is there any obvious way of deriving such a list from the lessons themselves In the case of pronunciation, for example, the definit ion of the objective in the curriculum and *Nuachursai* handbooks is in general terms, illustrated informally by examples of the kinds of points to be emphasized in teaching Detailed lists of particular sounds or categories of sounds which might be the focus of teaching or which should be mastered at particular grade levels are not supplied

In relation to the *skill* dimension of objectives, it is also often difficult to determine precisely what behaviour successful pupils should exhibit, in what specific situations they should exhibit it, and to what tasks they should be capable of applying linguistic knowledge of a particular kind It should be emphasized, however, that it is not at all unusual for second language programmes to lack this level of specification of objectives and of expected standards of performance There may even be worthwhile arguments on educational grounds against being overly specific At the same time, there can be no doubt that this state of affairs does pose problems in developing a criterion-referenced test, in attempting to make meaningful statements about the success or otherwise of various programmes and methods, or indeed in accurately monitoring the progress of pupils during their primary school years

The development of the present test necessarily involved making judg ments about how the syllabus and guidelines in the curriculum handbook and the listed linguistic materials and lessons in the relevant *Nuachursai* handbooks should be translated into specific testable objectives The general principle adopted was that any material which occurred regularly in a series of *Nuachursai* lessons and any skills or uses of the language which were the focus of specific practice in a lesson could form part of the basis of an objective Isolated, difficult material or exercises which seemed incidental to the main work of a lesson were disregarded Including all but incidental material may appear to make the content dimension of objectives very demanding There is at least a loose justification for this decision to be found in the introduction to the list of elements given in the *Nuachursai* handbooks 'Is e ata sa ghluais seo achomaireacht ar an méid den Ghaeilge a bhi ar intinn a chur ar chumas na bpaisti de bharr cursai comhrá ' (20, p 70) Whether or not our approach to defining the content dimension of objectives is too demanding, it does have the merit of being reasonably replicable and of yielding definitions of

objectives which are related in a straightforward way to the *Nuachursai* material It also helps to minimize the subjective element in determining the content dimension of objectives

The outcome of analysis of the *Nuachursai* was the identification of 16 objectives in spoken Irish, which, it was felt, could be measured within a reasonable testing period These objectives, along with the number of items used to test each, are listed as brief titles in Table 2

TABLE 2

LISTING OF OBJECTIVES REPRESENTED ON BG-VI CRITERION REFERENCED TEST OF SPOKEN IRISH

	Listening objectives	Number of items		Speaking objectives	Number of items
1	Sound discrimination	(10)	8	Pronunciation	(10)
2	Listening vocabulary	(20)	9	Speaking vocabulary	(10)
3	General comprehension of speech	(25)	10	Fluency of oral description	(10)
4	Understanding the morphology of verbs	(8)	11	Control of the morphology of verbs	(8)
5	Understanding the morphology of prepositions	(4)	12	Control of the morphology of prepositions	(4)
6	Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	(4)	13	Control of the morphology of qualifiers	(4)
7	Understanding the morphology of nouns	(4)	14	Control of the morphology of nouns	(4)
			15	Control of the syntax of statements	(7)
			16	Control of the syntax of questions	(3)
	Total listening items	(75)		Total speaking items	(60)

On the test, items relating to objectives 3 and 10 followed items relating to objectives 7 and 16 respectively Otherwise, groups of items relating to the various objectives were administered in the order shown here

The objectives range from relatively broad categories of behaviour such as 'general comprehension of speech' to quite narrow ones such as 'control of the morphology of nouns in speaking' Each objective has both a content dimension and a skill dimension The content dimension can be thought of as a list of those verb forms, vocabulary items, question forms, etc , in the *Nuachursai* which the pupil is expected to be able to use in speaking or to recognise in listening The skill dimension consists of the actual linguistic behaviour involved, that is, the particular speaking or listening activity in the context of which the linguistic knowledge just referred to is to be applied

The brief description of the skill dimensions in Table 2 will now be amplified and made operational by describing some of the test tasks and item types used The nature and range of the linguistic content sampled in the case of certain objectives will also be described Unfortunately, the simplest and most precise approach to describing the objectives – the presentation of a sample of the actual items used – cannot be adopted here since it is intended to use the tests again in future surveys

The number of items included on the test for each objective was primarily determined by the range of content and behaviour which had to be sampled The total number of items which could be answered in a reasonable testing period also imposed limitations Each objective was tested in a form and context which was similar to, though not identical with, its representation in the relevant *Nuachursai* lessons A pretest version of equivalent sets of items was administered to a sample of 220 sixth-grade pupils and a detailed item analysis conducted This provided an opportunity to identify defective items and to either rewrite them or replace them with equivalent ones which were psychometrically sound Item analysis data were not used to select items of any particular difficulty level or of any particular type

All items used to test listening objectives were in multiple-choice form and were presented on a cassette tape to entire class groups of pupils The cassette was recorded by male and female primary teachers who were native speakers of Connaught Irish Each spoken item on the tape was followed by the various multiple-choice spoken answers Key parts of some groups of items were repeated after a short pause Some items had printed versions of the answer options in the pupils' test booklets No question could be answered by reading alone, however, and the vast majority of items could, if necessary, be answered without making any

use of the printed item material at all Answers were recorded by pupils marking one of four letters in a test booklet Considerable use was made of drawings The items relating to listening objectives were always administered before those relating to speaking objectives and on a different day Pupil responses to speaking items were included in the analyses reported here only if the entire set of listening items had been previously answered

All items representing the speaking objectives were administered to pupils individually in a face to face interview situation These items involved the examiner saying sentences, asking questions, or displaying drawings The pupils' response involved a spoken word, phrase, sentence, question, or longer oral description The groups of items representing the 'pronunciation' objective involved the pupil reading a short simple passage aloud The examiner, in presenting all items, was guided by detailed printed directions which specified what supplementary probing should follow either a failure to respond or an ambiguous response, the circumstances in which mimes and prompts were to be used, the criteria for awarding scores and so on

While the general directions to the pupils were primarily in English for the listening items, and in both Irish and English for the speaking items, the item material itself was always in Irish only Each objective was tested independently as far as possible For example, in testing 'control of the morphology of verbs in speaking', the aim was to measure, among other things, pupils' ability to say the correct tense/person form of a verb in a given spoken context rather than their knowledge of vocabulary To ensure that a pupil did not fail an item of this type simply because he or she could not recall the basic vocabulary item, either a different tense form of the key verb was included in the stimulus part of the item or the examiner prompted with such a form Similarly, in measuring 'speaking vocabulary', errors in the grammatical form of the spoken key word were disregarded as long as the identity of the basic vocabulary item was clear and correct

The methods of testing used in the case of three individual objectives will now be described more fully 'pronunciation','general comprehension of speech' and 'fluency of oral description' 'Pronunciation' is discussed because the method of testing was not considered entirely satisfactory and so the results relating to it need to be treated with caution The methods used in testing the other two objectives are discussed because of the central importance of the objectives themselves and in order to give

some indication of the range of procedures used

'Pronunciation' was tested by having each pupil read the same brief, simple passage aloud The examiner assigned a score of one for each of a series of prespecified sounds occurring in the passage which were correctly pronounced There are a number of reservations which must be noted about this method First, the scores it yields must, at least in the case of a small number of the weakest readers, reflect reading ability as well as pronunciation Second, no specific guidance was given to the examiner on what was to be accepted as correct pronunciation Third, a small scale preliminary study of examiner reliability showed that while virtually the same number of pupils in a group were designated masters of the 'pronunciation' objective by different examiners on different occasions, the particular pupils identified as masters varied considerably Since the present study is not concerned with the measurement of individual performance, it may be argued that this group level consistency achieved by examiners is adequate Nevertheless, taken together with the first two points, it does suggest that until more complete reliability data are available, the present results relating to 'pronunciation' should be interpreted guardedly

In testing 'general comprehension of speech', three different approaches were used One group of items required the pupil to identify which of four different drawings exactly matched the situation described in a simple spoken sentence The second group of items required the pupil to listen to a statement and then to answer a spoken multiple choice question concerning the speaker's identity, location, or feelings, the identity of the person addressed, the occasion on which the statement was uttered, or the content of the statement itself The third group of items required the pupil to listen to a brief (60+ words) spoken description of an incident and then to answer a series of spoken multiple-choice questions involving the identification of information or the making of simple inferences

In the case of 'fluency of oral description', the pupil was required to say, without undue hesitation, a series of connected sentences which told the story underlying a series of pictures Grammatical inaccuracies were ignored in assigning scores unless they rendered the sentences fundamentally incomprehensible

Turning now to the content dimension of objectives, it should be noted that in the case of the three objectives just mentioned as well as one

other, 'sound discrimination', no precise list of relevant linguistic content is provided in the *Nuachursai* handbooks Thus, the set of sounds and sound contrasts which were sampled in testing 'pronunciation' and 'sound discrimination' were assembled on the basis of general statements and examples in the curriculum and *Nuachursai* handbooks as well as the views of teachers and linguists The linguistic content corresponding to 'fluency of oral description' and 'general comprehension of speech', likewise, could not be precisely identified It was defined in each case simply as the linguistic content typical of *Nuachursai* lessons at the fifth and sixth-grade level but excluding difficult vocabulary and syntactic structures

There are a number of objectives also where the range of linguistic content sampled will not be entirely obvious from the summary description in Table 2, in particular the various objectives involving a knowledge of morphology What is being tested in all these objectives, as in the case of 'control of the morphology of verbs in speaking' mentioned above, for example, is the ability to say or identify the correct *form* of a particular word to fit a given spoken (and pictorial) context In fact, however, the term morphology has to be interpreted rather loosely here since in any reasonably natural testing situation it is impossible to separate certain types of linguistic knowledge contributing to a response This will be particularly true in the case of items testing speaking objectives where the pupil does not have ready-made responses to choose between For example, items relating to the 'morphology of prepositions' may actually involve knowledge of such things as the correct preposition to be used with a given verb or the preposition necessary to convey a particular meaning as well as knowledge of the conjugated forms of prepositions

Very briefly, and without giving an exhaustive list, the content sampled in the case of objectives relating to the morphology of prepositions, qualifiers, and nouns includes the following objectives 5 and 12 – prepositional pronouns and prepositions used with verbs, objectives 6 and 13 – case and comparative forms of adjectives, ordinal and personal forms of numbers, and adverbs of position and direction, objectives 7 and 14 – case and plural forms of nouns Further details will be found in a forthcoming report (14)

It need hardly be said that not all the objectives of the *Nuachursai* are represented in the test It is at least conceivable, also, that some of those objectives which have been included might have been cast in some

fundamentally different way For example, an attempt might have been made to analyse the *Nuachursai* lessons with a view to extracting objectives organised in terms of communicative (39, 41) rather than primarily linguistic categories To have done this, however, would have been to ignore the nature of the *Nuachursai* themselves, the kind of teaching methods and pupil learning they promote, and the type of speaking and listening skills they initially develop The *Nuachursai* are essentially audio visual in character and, as the list of elements underlying the lessons given in the relevant handbooks show, they are based on a structural linguistic syllabus (28) The process of identifying and defining objectives and of developing items to test them had to do justice to these facts before anything else The merits of different syllabuses and teaching methods and the value of the skills they develop are entirely separate issues and, in the present context, essentially secondary ones

Mastery

In order to be able to say how frequently various objectives are mastered by pupils, an operational definition of mastery is needed Arriving at a definition of mastery is particularly important in the context of a study such as this since no previous comparative data on achievement in spoken Irish are available In future studies the present data can provide a reference point for assessing changes at a variety of operationally defined perfor mance levels (34, 35) The problem with presenting the results in terms of mastery, however, is that no entirely satisfactory method of deter mining cut-off scores exists In fact, this whole subject is currently the focus of intense debate in the educational measurement literature (10, 33, 34, 35) The problem is responded to in two ways in the present study First, converging evidence from a number of different sources, including the judgments of a group of experts based on the test items themselves, is presented for the operational definition of mastery adopted Second, in order not to anchor all the results to mastery and to give a richer picture of pupil achievement in spoken Irish, data relating to another level of performance is also presented

The experts' judgments were obtained using a modified version (12) of the Angoff method (2, 24) This involved submitting the items relating to each objective to eighteen primary-school inspectors before any testing began These inspectors were all thoroughly familiar with the *Nuachursai* and were regularly involved in monitoring the teaching of Irish in primary schools Some of them had been engaged earlier in developing a criterion-referenced mathematics test Each inspector was given a copy of the test

materials as well as written directions setting out how the mastery score was to be determined The directions required each inspector to familiarize himself with the test and to decide what score would be obtained by a pupil who had barely mastered the objective corresponding to each group of items It was suggested that in making judgments, a group of pupils, all of whom had barely mastered the objective in question, might be imagined The question to be decided, then, was what score exactly would be obtained by each pupil in that group The directions emphasized that the required estimate concerned the expected performance of barely mastering pupils on the sample of items actually included on the test Thus, the level of the mastery score could, in effect, compensate for certain kinds of error which might have occurred in translating *Nuachursai* objectives into actual items at the test development stage Other directions to the inspectors dealt with such issues as the possible contribution of guessing to multiple choice items at different values of the mastery cut off score (12)

There was a distinct tendency across the various objectives for the inspectors to equate mastery with a score of between 70% and 75% correct out of a maximum possible In addition, there was relatively little variation between inspectors in the mastery score designated for particular objectives It was determined that a criterion of 75% of the maximum possible score, with fractional results being truncated, provided the best fit to the rounded average mastery score recommended by the inspectors for each objective This criterion predicts the inspectors' mastery score in 13 of the 16 objectives In each of the remaining three objectives, the best fit estimate deviates by only one raw score point In only one of these three cases does the best fit estimate exceed the inspectors' score

This best fit criterion was adopted as a general definition of mastery for all 16 objectives The decision to disregard the three instances where the best fit estimate deviated from the inspectors' score can be at least partly justified by pointing to the possible accumulated effects of rounding over the 18 inspectors The primary motivation for adopting the best fit estimate, however, was simply the need for a general operational definition of mastery which would be applicable to new objectives on the second and fourth grade tests (13) as well as to the objectives on the sixth grade test Information from two other relevant sources, however, point to this same figure as an appropriate mastery cut off point First, it may be noted that in the case of the Drumcondra Criterion-Referenced Mathematics Test, the mastery score is set at two items correct on objectives

sampled by two or three items and at six items correct on objectives sampled by eight items (5) A level of 75% correct is the lowest general criterion which will predict the actual mastery scores used in these two, three, and eight item objectives, assuming that fractions are rounded in the usual way (e g , 75% of 2 = 1 5, rounded to 2, etc) Second, a criterion of 75% correct (or higher) is also described in the Ontario Ministry of Education's curriculum handbook (4) for French core (non-immersion) programmes as being usual in criterion referenced testing of second language objectives

Despite these quite positive indications, the fact remains that the procedure for setting the mastery cut off score here, as in virtually all studies, is neither highly precise nor well based theoretically For example, groups other than inspectors, such as parents or teachers, might well have recommended a different criterion In the United States, for example, there seems to be a tendency for parents to define mastery quite strictly, for teachers to define it more leniently, while the judgments of curriculum experts tend to lie somewhere in between In Ireland, too, there is some evidence that teachers may be more generous in attributing mastery of mathematics objectives to their pupils than are criterion referenced tests (3)

All this suggests that while there are strong reasons for presenting the main results of the study in terms of mastery of objectives, other data which give a more complete picture of performance should also be presented The data chosen for this latter purpose relate to a level of performance much lower than mastery, what will be termed 'minimal progress' in relation to an objective The operational definition of 'minimal progress' adopted here will be discussed below after data on mastery of objectives have been presented

Sample

The sample consisted of all sixth-grade pupils in a random sample of sixth grade classes stratified by county Classes, the basic sampling unit, were selected by first listing all classes containing sixth grade pupils in the Republic of Ireland, excluding those in Gaeltacht schools and in schools for the handicapped The order of listing classes was by roll number of school within county Where more than one class within a school contained sixth-grade pupils, these classes, identified by teachers, were listed consecutively Starting with a random number, every 27th class was then selected – 119 classes in all In effect, no more than one sixth grade class could be selected from any one school because of the

size of the selection intervals.

All sixth-grade pupils present in all of the classes took the test. The results reported here are based on 1,984 pupils (902 boys and 1,082 girls) who completed the test (listening and speaking sections) on two separate days. Eleven individual pupils who had either never studied Irish or who had only recently begun to do so (e.g., children of recently returned emigrants) were not included in the final sample. None of the classes happens to come from an all-Irish school. Details of population and sample statistics and sampling fractions are given in Table 3.

All testing was conducted by primary school inspectors of the Department of Education in May and June, 1978.

TABLE 3

POPULATION AND SAMPLE STATISTICS FOR SIXTH-GRADE CLASSES

Grade Composition of classes	Population*		Sample		Sampling fraction (classes)
	Classes	6th grade pupils	Classes	6th grade pupils	
	N	N	N	N	
6th grade only	1,051	37,220	36	1,132	.034
6th grade plus one other grade	931	15,388	33	526	.035
Multigrade (including 6th)	1,226	11,006	50	326	.041
Total	3,208	63,614	119	1,984	.037

* Republic of Ireland, excluding Gaeltacht areas. Information supplied by Statistics Section, Department of Education.

RESULTS

The percentages of pupils attaining mastery of each objective are set out in Table 4 Percentages of boys and girls, as well as differences between the percentage of boys and girls mastering each objective, are also shown It can be seen that most of the Irish speaking and listening objectives are mastered by a minority of pupils Only two objectives, 'sound discrimination' and 'pronunciation', are mastered by a majority of pupils These two objectives are followed, in order of magnitude of the percentage of pupils attaining mastery, by 'general comprehension of speech' and 'fluency of oral description', both of which are mastered by a little more than 40% of pupils The next highest percentage is associated with the 'listening vocabulary' objective which is mastered by 30 85% of pupils The corresponding 'speaking vocabulary' objective is mastered by 21 77% of pupils, though this latter percentage does not follow next in order of magnitude

Of the eight objectives involving a knowledge of morphology (objectives number 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, and 14) none is mastered by much more than a quarter of pupils and some are mastered by considerably smaller proportions The lowest achievement is associated with the four objectives which relate to the morphology of verbs and nouns 'Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening' is mastered by 16 23% of pupils while 'control of the morphology of verbs in speaking' is mastered by 10 38 percent In the case of nouns, 19 20% of pupils master the objective concerned with 'control of the morphology of nouns in speaking', while only 7 46% master the objective concerned with 'understanding the morphology of nouns in listening' The remaining four objectives in this group relate to the morphology of prepositions and qualifiers and all are mastered by between 20 and 26% of pupils 'understanding the morphology of prepositions in listening', 'control of the morphology of prepositions in speaking', 'understanding the morphology of qualifiers in listening', and 'control of the morphology of qualifiers in speaking'

Two speaking objectives which are not matched here by any listening objectives are 'control of the syntax of statements in speaking' and 'control of the syntax of questions in speaking' Both objectives are mastered by 17 to 18% of pupils

Turning now to some broader aspects of the data, it can be seen that the objectives break down into various larger groups according to the relative success of pupils For example, those objectives which involve

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGES OF PUPILS ATTAINING MASTERY OF OBJECTIVES IN SPOKEN IRISH AT THE END OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

Objectives	Percentage of pupils attaining mastery			
	Boys	Girls	Difference	All pupils
N =	902	1,082	G – B	1,984
Listening objectives				
1. Sound discrimination	68.74	79.39	10.65	74.55
2. Listening vocabulary	23.84	36.68	12.84	30.85
3. General comprehension of speech	35.37	46.86	11.49	41.63
4. Understanding the morphology of verbs	12.64	19.22	6.58	16.23
5. Understanding the morphology of prepositions	21.84	31.15	9.31	26.92
6. Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	18.74	22.83	4.09	20.97
7. Understanding the morphology of nouns	6.65	8.13	1.48	7.46
Speaking objectives				
8. Pronunciation	49.67	66.27	16.60	58.72
9. Speaking vocabulary	17.63	25.23	7.60	21.77
10. Fluency of oral description	36.70	44.55	7.85	40.98
11. Control of the morphology of verbs	7.21	13.03	5.82	10.38
12. Control of the morphology of prepositions	14.52	26.52	12.00	21.07
13. Control of the morphology of qualifiers	17.63	25.32	7.69	21.83
14. Control of the morphology of nouns	16.19	21.72	5.53	19.20
15. Control of the syntax of statements	14.41	20.70	6.29	17.84
16. Control of the syntax of questions	15.52	19.87	4.35	17.89

Mastery = 75% of the items used to test that objective answered correctly.

a knowledge of what could broadly be described as grammar (objectives number 4 to 7 and 11 to 16) are almost invariably mastered less frequently than 'non-grammar related' ones (objectives number 1 to 3 and 8 to 10) In a rank ordering of the 16 objectives according to the percentages of pupils attaining mastery, the six 'non-grammar related' objectives receive ranks of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 This trend can also be observed in the mean percentages of pupils achieving mastery of 'grammar related' and 'non-grammar-related' groups of objectives which are shown in the left-hand column of Table 5

TABLE 5

MEAN PERCENTAGES OF PUPILS ACHIEVING MASTERY AND OF PUPILS MAKING AT LEAST MINIMAL PROGRESS IN FOUR GROUPS OF OBJECTIVES

Groups of Objectives	Mean % of pupils	
	Achieving mastery	Making at least minimal progress
Listening objectives	31 23	79 34
'Speaking' objectives	25 52	57 73
'Grammar-related' objectives	17 98	62 07
'Non-grammar related' objectives	44 75	75 72
All objectives	28 02	67 19

Mastery = 75% correct, Minimal progress = 40% correct

If objectives number 15 and 16 which do not have equivalents among the listening objectives are excluded, the mean percentage of pupils achieving mastery of the speaking objectives increases to 27 71%, and the mean percentage of pupils making at least minimal progress increases to 61 57 percent

Another major division in the objectives is between those related to speaking and those related to listening The mean percentage of pupils who mastered the seven listening objectives is 31 23%, while the mean percentage who mastered the corresponding seven speaking objectives is 27 71 percent If all nine speaking objectives are considered, the mean percentage for speaking objectives falls to 25 52 percent The mean

percentage of pupils achieving mastery over all 16 objectives is 28 02 percent (Table 5)

A more revealing way of comparing speaking and listening is to examine percentages of pupils attaining mastery on pairs of equivalent speaking and listening objectives pairs of objectives numbered 1 and 8, 2 and 9, 3 and 10, 4 and 11, 5 and 12, 6 and 13, and 7 and 14 (Table 4) In the case of five of these seven comparisons, the listening objective is mastered by more pupils than is the corresponding speaking objective In the remaining two, it is the speaking objective which is mastered by more pupils There is some evidence, then, of a tendency for listening objectives to be mastered by more pupils than speaking objectives, though the difference is not consistent

Turning to gender differences, it can be seen from Table 4 that there is a consistent difference between boys and girls, in favour of girls, in the percentages mastering each of the 16 objectives The average mean difference in the percentages for boys and girls over all objectives is 8 13 percent A rank ordering of the percentages attaining mastery of the various objectives for boys and girls does not reveal any systematic gender difference in the kind of objectives most frequently mastered On average, gender differences are greater for the non grammar related objectives (objectives number 1 to 3 and 8 to 11), but this may reflect little more than the fact that there is a generally higher level of achievement for both genders in the case of these objectives

Since the percentage of pupils achieving mastery of most objectives is relatively low, the case made earlier for presenting test data relating to a level of performance lower than mastery is even stronger The difficulty is in arriving at a criterion of performance lower than mastery which is not simply norm or group referenced An entirely meaningful criterion would be the percentage of pupils who had made no measurable progress at all towards acquiring the behaviour defined by each objective In some cases, however, the percentages scoring zero on the items relating to each objective are themselves either zero or extremely low An alternative but more ambiguous criterion is the percentage of pupils who have made some minimal level of progress in relation to each objective One operational definition of minimal progress might be success on at least one item relating to an objective Unfortunately, the quality of performance indicated by a score of one depends heavily on the number of items used to test each objective A minimal progress criterion which does not

have this disadvantage is the traditional 40% correct, still commonly used in examinations to define a passing grade While this criterion has been adopted for the present purposes, it should be emphasized that, on its own, it is essentially arbitrary It is well known, for example, that the content of examinations as well as the leniency of marking procedures are often adjusted so that the 40% cut off point yields a predetermined number of passing candidates (1) This element of the criterion's arbitrariness can be discounted in the present case since the test items were designed to mirror the content-skill objectives of the widely used and familiar *Nuachursai* Thus, 40% correct, as used here, does have a sensible if rather loose interpretation In all other respects, however, the criterion remains arbitrary The data about to be presented should be seen as providing no more than a rough and ready indication of the percentages of pupils who have made a minimal level of progress in relation to each objective

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGES OF PUPILS WHO HAVE MADE AT LEAST A MINIMAL LEVEL OF PROGRESS IN RELATION TO EACH OBJECTIVE

	Objectives	Percentage of pupils making at least minimal progress N = 1,984
	Listening objectives	
1	Sound discrimination	93 30
2	Listening vocabulary	76 36
3	General comprehension of speech	84 68
4	Understanding the morphology of verbs	62 45
5	Understanding the morphology of prepositions	88 91
6	Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	80 04
7	Understanding the morphology of nouns	69 66
	Speaking objectives	
8	Pronunciation	89 26
9	Speaking vocabulary	45 87
10	Fluency of oral description	64 82
11	Control of the morphology of verbs	30 85
12	Control of the morphology of prepositions	63 76
13	Control of the morphology of qualifiers	69 71
14	Control of the morphology of nouns	66 73
15	Control of the syntax of statements	46 12
16	Control of the syntax of questions	42 44

'Minimal progress' = 40% of the items used to test that objective answered correctly

Table 6 shows the percentage of pupils who succeed on at least 40% of the items used to test each objective Fractional criterion scores have been truncated as in the case of the mastery criterion At the level of individual objectives, it may be noted that 64 82% of pupils make at least minimal progress in relation to 'fluency of oral description' while 84 68% make at least minimal progress in relation to 'general comprehension of speech' Within the speaking and listening groups of objectives, those objectives involving a knowledge of verb morphology are the ones with the lowest percentages of pupils making minimal progress 62 45% in the case of 'understanding the morphology of verbs in listening' and 30 85% in the case of 'control of the morphology of verbs in speaking'

The percentages making minimal progress (Table 6) may also be compared with the percentages achieving mastery (Table 4) It may be observed that, in general, the differences between equivalent speaking and listening objectives tend to be greater for 'minimal progress' percentages than for mastery percentages The opposite is true of the differences between grammar related and non-grammar related groups of objectives, differences tend to be greater in the case of the mastery percentages These trends can also be observed in Table 5 where the mean percentages of pupils achieving mastery and making minimal progress are shown

Finally, at a more general level, Table 5 shows that the mean percentage of pupils who make at least a minimal level of progress in relation to each objective is 67 19 percent The corresponding mean for pupils achieving mastery of each objective is 28 02 percent The latter mean percentage for mastery is included in the former mean percentage for minimal progress since, at the level of individual objectives, any pupil who has reached the criterion for mastery has also reached the criterion for minimal progress The difference between these two mean percentages, 39 17, is the mean percentage of pupils reaching the criterion for minimal progress but not reaching the criterion for mastery In other words less than a third of pupils (28 02%) on average, master each objective, while more than a third (39 17%), on average, make at least minimal progress in relation to each objective without achieving mastery

DISCUSSION

The fact that two objectives which are central to the teaching of Irish, 'general comprehension of speech' and 'fluency of oral description', are mastered by a relatively substantial proportion, though not a majority,

of pupils may be regarded as one of the more positive results of this study Another satisfactory result is the finding that a majority of pupils master the 'sound discrimination' and 'pronunciation' objectives, although here the reservations noted earlier about the method of testing 'pronunciation' must be recalled The results in the case of the two remaining non grammar related objectives – 'listening vocabulary' and 'speaking vocabulary' – are a little unexpected Given that the vocabulary items in the *Nuachursai* are selected on the basis of the *Buntus* frequency data and that they are systematically introduced and revised in the lessons, the percentages of pupils mastering vocabulary objectives might have been expected to be particularly high Yet, less than a third of pupils master one of these objectives, while less than a quarter of pupils master the other

The results in the case of the various objectives related to grammar (syntax and morphology) are more disappointing generally The emphasis in the case of all these objectives is on precision in the use or interpretation of word forms and structures Although we have no evidence on the matter, it does seem likely that the kind of precision referred to in some of these objectives is more important to communication in Irish than is the precision referred to in others Thus, poor results will also be more significant in the case of some of these grammar related objectives than they are in others For example, verb morphology has a crucial semantic role in communication and this is reflected in the emphasis in the *Nuachursai* on developing in pupils a command of a relatively complete morphological system in the case of verbs This emphasis is also reflected, presumably, in the amount of time which teachers allocate to teaching this aspect of spoken Irish The fact, then, that only a small minority of pupils master objectives relating to the use and interpretation of verb forms in speaking and listening must be a matter for concern It may be noted in passing that poor results for verb related objectives have also been obtained in the fourth and second-grade surveys (14) It may be significant, too, that preliminary results of a recent study identify tense forms of verbs as a particular source of difficulty for primary school children learning Welsh (32)

Another skill which is central to effective spoken communication is the ability to formulate questions precisely On the other hand, a knowledge of the morphology of nouns may be less critical, at least to the basic 'exchange-of information' aspect of communication Thus, the relatively poor results in the case of objectives such as 'control of the syntax of questions in speaking' and 'control of the morphology of nouns in

speaking' should probably not be given equal weight Similar considerations apply in interpreting the results concerning mastery of the other grammar-related objectives

In considering the more general finding that pupils' mastery of non-grammar related objectives is usually superior to their mastery of grammar-related ones, it is relevant to note that in the survey of speaking and listening objectives at the second grade level conducted in 1982 (14), only 2 3% of teachers placed 'accuracy' first on their personal list of objectives in teaching Irish, whereas 22 9% accorded the first place to 'fluency' Of course, priority or effort in teaching is probably only one of many possible considerations here For example, it is possible that mastery of grammar related objectives in second language programmes always lags behind mastery of non-grammar related ones Unfortunately, we have no comparative data on this point

Findings from the present study on the superior performance of girls, compared to boys, are consistent with results showing a gender difference in favour of girls in Irish reading (27), in performance in the Irish papers in public examinations (30), and, indeed, in the area of language performance generally (25) They are also consistent with the results of the parallel surveys of achievement in spoken Irish conducted at the fourth and second grade levels (14)

Turning to the 'minimal progress' data, two points should be mentioned First, the fact that the difference between speaking and listening objectives is greater for minimal-progress percentages than for mastery percentages may be partly due to the influence of chance success The possible contribution of guessing increases as the cut off score decreases The greater contribution of chance in the case of minimal-progress data only involves listening items, however, since only these items are in multiple-choice form In other words, the percentages shown here as making at least minimal progress in relation to the various listening objectives may be somewhat inflated The second point to be noted about these data is the small numbers of pupils who reach the criterion for minimal progress on some key objectives For example, a little less than two thirds of pupils reach the minimal progress criterion for 'fluency of oral description , while less than a third reach this criterion for 'control of the morphology of verbs in speaking'

Looking at the results more generally, it is difficult to avoid the

conclusion, even making generous allowance for measurement error, that large numbers of pupils about to leave primary school have failed to master most of the objectives in spoken Irish appropriate to fifth and sixth grade In fact, on average, less than a third of pupils master each objective More significant, perhaps, is the finding that when the cut off score is reduced to quite a low level – 40% correct responses – only two thirds of pupils on average meet this minimal progress criterion for each objective This means that at the point of transition from primary to post primary education, about a third of pupils, on average, by any reasonable definition, have not made any worthwhile progress in relation to each of the objectives for fifth and sixth grades in primary schools

On the face of it, these results appear simply to confirm the impression created by the data on teachers' perceptions and pupil self-assessment that achievement in spoken Irish at the end of primary school is poor, declining, or both Thus, they merit serious study At the very least, their interpretation requires that we consider the nature and limitations of the present research, as well as the broad linguistic and educational context in which the teaching of Irish proceeds

Three sets of issues about the research itself need to be considered First, there is the variety of more or less technical points raised earlier concerning the definition of mastery, the identification of objectives, and the methods of testing employed Second, it is important to bear in mind that both the mastery data and the minimal-progress data refer only to fifth and sixth-grade objectives Thus, any pupils who may have mastered corresponding objectives, but incorporating only the more limited linguistic material appropriate to lower grade levels, are not counted This point may also apply to some pupils failing to reach the minimal progress criterion In other words, an indeterminate number of those pupils who fail to reach either the mastery or minimal progress criterion for various objectives may actually have acquired some degree of competence in the relevant aspect of spoken Irish Third, none of the data reported here can be considered directly relevant to the question of changing standards of achievement in spoken Irish, since no comparative data are available All the present research does is to quantify the gap between goals in teaching spoken Irish on the one hand and actual pupil progress towards these goals on the other While the gap revealed is substantial, the data do not provide any basis for saying how long standing it is

More important than these particular research issues, however, is a consideration of the results in the broader linguistic and educational context in which Irish is taught The central question here is what level of performance in the spoken language can be considered 'bad' in a primary school programme of the kind we have in Irish? The answer to this question has implications for the role of implicit standards, not only in interpreting the significance of objective test scores or pupil self assessment data, but also in determining teachers' and parents' perceptions

Unfortunately, the kind of comparative data which might have been derived from studies in other countries, and which might allow us to say with some reasonable degree of objectivity what level of performance in a second language is good or bad, simply is not available This is due in part to a failure of published evaluation studies to supply sufficient detail of the right kind Such studies often focus only on broad differences in the linguistic effects of different types of language programmes, without giving a detailed account of performance Other difficulties are presented by differences in programme goals, in methods of instruction, and in languages themselves A more fundamental problem than any of these, however, is simply that the combination of linguistic and educational characteristics associated with the situation in which Irish is taught is unusual (16) In other countries, large scale teaching of second languages begins no earlier than middle or late primary school (36), except in situations where, outside the school, there is some exposure to and pressure to use the language where, within the school, a programme of full or partial immersion is in operation (16, 36, 38) Contrast this with the general situation in the case of Irish where there is no significant naturally occurring pressure outside the school, and only a limited amount of contrived pressure within it, to use the language as a medium of communi cation, and where it is, in the main, taught from the beginning of primary school as a single school subject The further critical fact that the main goal of teaching Irish is to produce competence in speaking makes such contrasts with primary second language programmes elsewhere all the more difficult

The objectives and performance expectations which the *Nuachursai* represent are likely to be, at least in part, simply a reflection of the informed judgments of the course authors and their advisors (28, pp 7 8) about what was appropriate for and achievable by primary-school pupils Unfortunately, there appears to be no published information concerning the bases for these judgments Neither is it clear whether the *Nuachursai*

were intended to represent realistic objectives to be mastered by the majority of pupils or whether the authors deliberately erred on the side of being ambitious in order to accommodate more able pupils and to spur on less able ones Finally, it is not known whether any attempt was made to match up, in any sense, the demands of the *Nuachursai* with the demands of the ABC course (17, 29) as that course would have been typically implemented in schools from the 1930s to the 1960s

These observations serve to draw attention to the fact that the gap between teaching goals and actual pupil achievement revealed in the present study is to an unknown extent a measure simply of how realistic and appropriate were the expectations of the developers of the *Nuachurai* regarding the performance of pupils in general This kind of issue is not peculiar to the Irish situation Recently, Merrill Swain raised more or less the same point in the context of a discussion of programmes in Canada which employ varying degress of second language medium instruction

> The extent to which program outcomes correspond to expectations is the extent to which a program is considered to have succeeded or failed Thus, it becomes crucially important that we do not inadvert antly 'cause' failure by having expectations that are attainable
>
> How does one know when the program is at fault or when the expectations are at fault if a program fails to attain its goals? Whose expectations is one talking about the learners? the parents? the teachers? the Ministry of Education? It is my belief that expectations can be more realistically formulated only through an examination of the outcomes of different programs designed to meet similar or different goals (37, pp 486-487)

None of this suggests that our only options in the case of Irish are to modify existing expectations or to resign ourselves to low levels of performance It does imply, however, that the interpretation of the present data must take full account of the complexity of social, educational, and linguistic factors, if the most successful strategies for improving performance are to be identified It is particularly important to guard against an attitude which assumes that the proper response to the results reported here is to go to work immediately on changing the syllabus, teaching methods, and so on Changes in these areas might indeed improve performance to some extent and in the case of the communicative approach (15, 39, 41) there would be the added potential advantage of developing in pupils a type of competence which was more immediately

relevant to the real life use of the language But if pupil performance is anywhere close to a maximum for the kind of 'Irish as a core subject-only' programme which is most common at present, then, of course, programme internal changes such as those just mentioned are unlikely to be sufficient to narrow significantly an expectations-performance gap of the magnitude revealed by the present results A worthwhile improvement in the situation may require more fundamental changes in the place of Irish in the curriculum – a substantial increase in the amount of time devoted to the teaching of Irish as a core subject or more widespread use of essentially different types of approaches, such as 'extended core', 'partial immersion', and 'full immersion' programmes The very introduction of such basic changes, however, not to mention their success, would in turn be heavily dependant on a number of social, educational, and linguistic factors, not least of which would be the attitudes of parents (8)

It is possible, indeed, to imagine certain kinds of well motivated, radical changes within the existing programme which, if precipitately executed, could be counter productive An example of this would be the widespread replacement of the existing mainly audio visual *Nua chursai* with a communicative syllabus and methodology, just as the *Nuachursai* themselves more or less totally replaced the ABC method Among the disadvantages attaching to this strategy would be the extent to which it would distract from what should be the prior task of determining realistic expectations for different broad programme options More important, however, is the fact that it is not at all certain that for many teachers the problems of adjustment and relearning presented by the new approach would be outweighed, within a reasonable period, by any inherent advantages it might have In other words, the expectations-performance gap, instead of being narrowed, might merely be redefined in communicative rather than linguistic terms

This is not to argue against properly paced change and development in syllabuses and teaching methodology It does suggest, however, that only those innovations which have been concretely implemented in actual courses and teacher retraining procedures, and the superiority of which has been demonstrated in pilot testing in a variety of contexts, should be considered for widespread introduction in schools A final decision on such innovations should involve setting the potential value of any new approach against the advantages of experience and familiarity which attach to the old approach To the extent that pilot testing might show that the

outcome differs across types of pupils and teachers, the wisdom of thinking in terms of a single best syllabus or teaching methodology would have to be questioned

Similar considerations apply to more basic changes which might be contemplated in the type of programme being implemented Research in Canada (37, 38) points to the fact that programme options such as 'extended core', 'partial immersion', and 'full immersion', essentially varying degrees of second-language medium instruction, can all be highly effective There is limited evidence in this country to suggest that, when the conditions are right, this success can be repeated in the case of Irish (8, 14, 31) What needs to be established now are the minimum social, educational, and linguistic conditions necessary for the successful intro duction of each type of programme

In the meantime, there seems to be a case for continued tolerance and even encouragement of diversity in syllabuses, teaching methods, and programme types Such an attitude, at the very least, allows teachers of Irish to respond to and take full advantage of the variety of social, educational, and linguistic conditions which exist throughout the country It also seems to be the only sensible policy, considering the modest state of our knowledge about what works best, and why, in teaching spoken Irish

REFERENCES

1 AIRASIAN, P W , KELLAGHAN, T MADAUS, G , & RYAN, J P Pay ment by results An analysis of a 19th century performance contracting program Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, Chicago, April 1972

2 ANGOFF, W H Scales, norms, and equivalent scores In R L Thorndike (Ed), *Educational measurement* (2nd ed) Washington, DC American Council on Education, 1971

3 ARCHER, P , & CLOSE, S F Teachers assessments of the mathematical skills of their pupils at a given point in time and the results of criterion-referenced tests Unpublished manuscript Educational Research Centre, St Patrick's College, Dublin, 1981

4 CANADA ONTARIO MINISTRY OF EDUCATION *French core programs 1980 Curriculum guidelines for the primary junior, intermediate and senior divisions* Toronto Ministry of Education, 1980

5 CLOSE, J F , KELLAGHAN, T , MADAUS, G F , & AIRASIAN P W Growth in mathematical attainments of pupils *Irish Journal of Education* 1978,

12, 3 21

6 COMMITTEE ON IRISH LANGUAGE ATTITUDES RESEARCH Educational sub report Unpublished manuscript, 1974

7 COMMITTEE ON IRISH LANGUAGE ATTITUDES RESEARCH *Report* Dublin Stationery Office 1975

8 CUMMINS, J Immersion programs The Irish experience *International Review of Education* 1978, *24*, 273-282

9 FONTES, P J ,& KELLAGHAN, T The new primary school curriculum Its implementation and effects Dublin Educational Research Centre, 1977

10 GLASS, G V Standards and criteria *Journal of Educational Measurement* 1978, *15*, 237 261

11 GREANEY, V Trends in attainment in Irish from 1973 to 1977 *Irish Journal of Education* 1978, *12* 22 35

12 HAMBLETON, R K , SWAMINATHAN, H , ALGINA, J , & COULSON, D B Criterion referenced testing and measurement A review of technical issues and developments *Review of Educational Research* 1978, *48* 1-47

13 HARRIS, J National assessment of speaking proficiency in Irish In W F Mackey et al, *Contemporary perspectives on the teaching of Irish* Dublin Bord na Gaeilge, 1982

14 HARRIS, J Spoken Irish in primary schools (Tentative title) Dublin Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann, forthcoming

15 HAWKES, N Teaching other types of beginner Primary children In K Johnson & K Morrow (Eds), *Communication in the classroom* Harlow, Essex Longman, 1981

16 HOY, P H The early teaching of modern languages A summary of reports from sixteen countries Paper prepared for Council of Europe symposium on modern languages in primary education, Holte, Denmark, September 1976 Council of Europe Document DECS/EGT (76) 39

17 IRELAND DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION *Notes for teachers Irish* Dublin Stationery Office, 1932

18 IRELAND DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION *Buntus Gaeilge Reamhthuarascail* Dublin Stationery Office, 1966

19 IRELAND DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION *Curaclam na bunscoile Lamhleabhar an oide Cuid 1 Primary school curriculum Teacher s handbook Part 1* Dublin Department of Education, 1971

20 IRELAND DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION *Cuchulainn/An Seanteach Cursai comhra Gaeilge le haghaidh rang V/VI Baile Atha Cliath Oifig an tSolathair* 1969

21 IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS ORGANISATION EDUCATION COMMITTEE *Primary school curriculum Curriculum questionnaire analysis* Dublin Author, 1976

22 KELLAGHAN, T , MACNAMARA, J , & NEUMAN, E Teachers' assessments of the scholastic progress of pupils *Irish Journal of Education* 1969, *2* 95 104

23 KELLAGHAN T & MADAUS G F Trends in educational standards in Great Britain and Ireland In G R Austin & J Garber (Eds), *The rise and fall of national test scores* New York Academic Press, 1982

24 LIVINGSTON, S A ,& ZIEKY, M J *Passing scores A manual for setting standards of performance on educational and occupational tests* Princeton, NJ

Educational Testing Service, 1982

25 MACCOBY, E E , & JACKLIN, C N *The psychology of sex differences* Stanford, Ca Stanford University Press, 1974

26 MADAUS, G , KELLAGHAN, T , FONTES, P , & AIRASIAN, P Educa tion in Ireland What the people say Unpublished manuscript Educational Research Centre, St Patrick s College, Dublin, 1976

27 MARTIN, M ,& KELLAGHAN, T Factors affecting reading attainment in Irish primary schools In V Greaney (Ed), *Studies in reading* Dublin Educational Company of Ireland, 1977

28 O DOMHNALLAIN, T Buntus Gaeilge – cuira, cur le cheile, cur i bhfeidhm *Teangeolas,* 1981, *13* 24 32

29 O DOMHNALLAIN, T ,& O GLIASAIN, M *Audio visual methods v A B C methods in the teaching of Irish* Dublin Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann, 1976

30 O RIAGAIN, P The influence of social factors on the teaching and learning of Irish In W F Mackey et al , *Contemporary perspectives on the teaching of Irish* Dublin Bord na Gaeilge, 1982

31 O RIAGAIN, P , & O GLIASAIN, M *All Irish primary schools in the Dublin area* Dublin Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann, 1979

32 PRICE, E Assessing first and second language skills in Welsh in the primary school Paper read at the Fifth International Symposium on Educational Testing, Stirling, 1982

33 SCRIVEN, M How to anchor standards *Journal of Educational Measure ment* 1978, *15* 273 275

34 SHEPARD, L Standard setting issues and methods *Applied Psychological Measurement* 1980, *4* 447-467

35 SHEPARD, L Technical issues in minimum competency testing In D C Berliner (Ed), *Review of research in education* Vol 8 Washington, DC American Educational Research Association, 1980

36 STERN, H H , & WEINRIB, A Foreign languages for younger children Trends and assessment *Language Teaching and Linguistics Abstracts* 1977, *10* 5 25

37 SWAIN, M Linguistic expectations Core extended and immersion programs *Canadian Modern Language Review* 1981, *37* 486-497

38 SWAIN, M , & LAPKIN S *Bilingual education in Ontario A decade of research* Toronto Ministry of Education, 1981

39 VAN EK, J A Current trends in second language teaching in Europe In W F Mackey et al , *Contemporary perspectives on the teaching of Irish* Dublin Bord na Gaeilge, 1982

40 WILLMOTT, A S *CSE AND GCE grading standards The 1973 compar ability study* London Macmillan Education, 1977

41 YALDEN, J *Communicative language teaching Principles and practice* Toronto Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1981