

'I thought that we had good Irish': Irish immersion students' insights into their target language use

Immersion Education: Pathways to Bilingualism and Beyond

Pádraig Ó Duibhir
St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Ireland
padraig.oduibhir@spd.dcu.ie
17 October 2008

1

Outline of presentation

- Background and purpose
- Literature
- Methodology
- 'Stimulated recall' activity
- Findings
- Implications

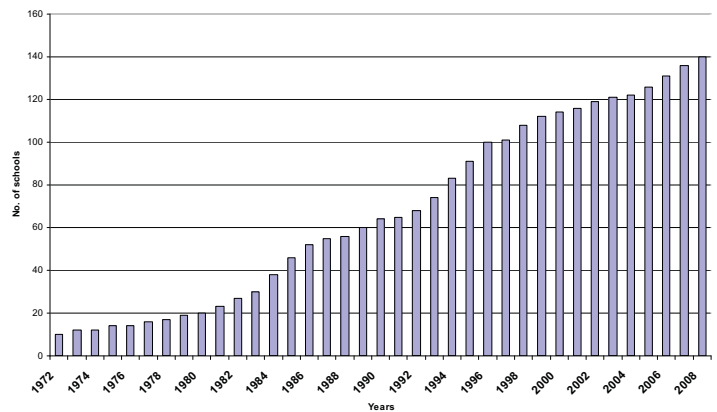
2

Background to Irish language

- Irish is an official language (minority)
- 72,000 daily speakers outside education – 22,000 in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking areas), 50,000 elsewhere
- Schools in Gaeltacht & Irish immersion (all-Irish) schools throughout the country
- 7.5% primary students – educated through Irish (33,000 – 23,000 in Irish immersion schools)



The Growth of Irish Immersion Schools in the 26 Counties 1972-2008



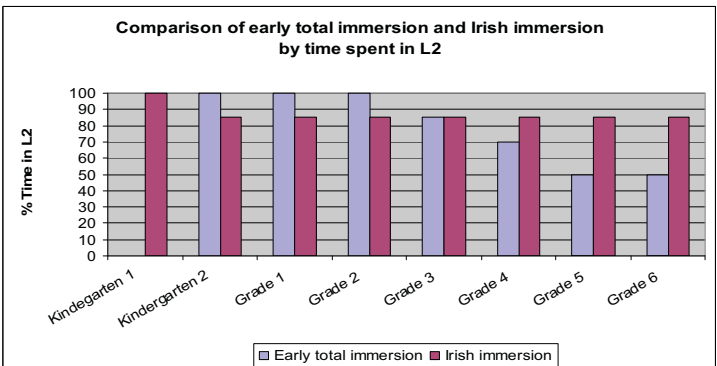
Source: www.gaelscoileanna.ie

Background to study

- early immersion policy in schools
- all schools are immersion centres
- students are expected to speak Irish at all times (except English language arts)
- immersion teachers teach all subjects (11 in total)
- approx 85% instruction through Irish from age 4-18
- researcher's experience as a teacher and principal in an Irish immersion school
- 'Gaelscoilís' 'speaking immersion' (Lyster, 1987)
- lack of accuracy in students' Irish
- persistence of errors

5

Time in L2



Total hours French immersion in Toronto: 4,830
Total hours Irish immersion in Ireland: 5,750

Language acquisition research

- Input processing – negotiate for meaning rather than form (VanPatten, 1996)
- emphasis on understanding and negotiation of meaning rather than form in immersion (Lyster, 2007)
- learners may bypass syntax and rely on schematic and contextual knowledge – rule-based v exemplar-based coding (Skehan, 1998)
- in producing language learners can be ‘pushed’ to focus on syntax/form (Swain, 1985, 2005)
- once communicative sufficiency has been reached little pressure or motivation to speak with accuracy (Day and Shapson, 1987)

7

Acquisition of Irish in Irish immersion schools

- students in Irish immersion schools achieve a high degree of proficiency in Irish relative to their peers in schools where Irish is taught as a subject (Harris, Forde, Archer, Nic Fhearaile & O’Gorman, 2006)
- very good fluency in the target language but they deviate from native speaker norms in their oral and written production (Henry, Andrews & Ó Cainín, 2002)
- the spoken Irish of students in Irish immersion schools has been referred to as a type of creole (Nic Pháidín, 2003; Ó Cíobháin, 1999)

8

Purpose of study

- What are the features of the Irish spoken by students in 6th class (age 11-12) after 7-8 years of immersion education (5,000 hrs)?
- What are their attitudes towards their own proficiency?
- Purposive sample of 9 Irish immersion schools & 2 *Gaeltacht* (native-speaker) schools
- 6th class students asked to design a school playground in groups of three – whole class activity
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 Irish and 14 French immersion teachers (Ontario) – attitudes to students’ proficiency in immersion language

9

Compilation of corpus

- video- (3 groups) and audio-recording (remaining groups) of groups
- transcription of first 20 minutes of video
- 7 hrs 20 mins. in total
- 65 Irish immersion students
- 15 *Gaeltacht* (native-speaker) students
- 35,338 words in total
- 30,785 words in Irish immersion corpus

10

Analysis of Irish immersion transcripts

- 29.2% of utterances contain errors – (not counting English)
- 10% English words in corpus (*Gaeltacht* students 6.65%)
- English discourse markers – ‘yeah’, ‘no’, ‘so’, ‘okay’, ‘just’, ‘like’, and ‘right’ account for 6.34% of Irish immersion corpus, 4.69% of *Gaeltacht* corpus
- Syntax – *‘*An bhfuil muid ábalta faigh níos mó capaillin?*’ [Are we able more horses to get?]
- The copula – *‘*Tá sé bord mór.*’ [It is a big table. *Subst.*]

11

Analysis of Irish immersion transcripts

- Morphology of verbs – *‘*An caithfidh tú an bonn agus an slabhra a fháil?*.’ [Do you have to get the tyre and chain? *Eclipsís*]
- Indirect speech – *‘*Ach ceapaim dúirt an fear sin gur ehm gur...*’ [But I think that man said ehm that...]
- Personal pronouns – *‘*Dhá cinn de é sin.*’ [Two of that.]
- Mapping of English syntax onto Irish - *‘*Tá sibh ag déanamh mo cheann isteach.*’ [You are doing my head in.]

12

Stimulated recall sessions

- researcher returned to school after 7-10 days
- groups of students withdrawn from class
- viewed video excerpts up to 3 mins. in length
- 3 stages
 1. general comment on quality of Irish
 2. given opportunity to correct mistakes
 3. discussion about factors that influence linguistic performance

13

Stage 1

R.	<i>Cad é a shíleann sibh anois?</i>	What do you think now?
A.	<i>Tá sé níos measa ná a shíl mé.</i>	It is worse than I thought.
I.	<i>Thig leis a bheith níos fearr.</i>	It could be better.
R.	<i>Cén bealach níos fearr?</i>	Better in what way?
I.	<i>Gan na foclaí Béarla isteach san abairt.</i>	Without the English words in the sentence.

14

A.	<i>Tá a lán focal Béarla istigh ann.</i>	There are a lot of English words in it.
C.	'Like', 'oh my God', 'yeah', 'probably'.	'Like', 'oh my God', 'yeah', 'probably'.
R.	<i>An raibh a fhios agaibh go raibh siad sin á úsáid agaibh?</i>	Did you know that you were using them?
E.	No, <i>tá sé</i> just like habit.	No, it is just like habit.

15

R.	<i>Cén bealach nach bhfuil sé chomh maith?</i>	In what way is it not as good?
L.	<i>Bhí cúpla mistakes ...botúin gramadach.</i>	There were a couple of mistakes ... grammatical mistakes.

16

Stage 2

R.	<i>Má deir tú leis an múinteoir 'Tá sin an peann luaidhe' Céard a déarfadh sí?</i>	Is you said to the teacher, 'That is the pencil.' (using substantive verb) What would she say?
J.	<i>Is peann luaidhe é sin.</i>	'That is a pencil.' (using copula)
R.	<i>An bhfuil bealach níos fearr chun 'tá sin an airgead' a rá.</i>	Is there a better way to say? 'That is the money.' (using substantive verb)
J.	<i>Sin an méid airgid a bhí ceadaithe.</i>	That is the amount of money that was allowed. (using copula)
J.	<i>Caithfidh tú foghlaim ó do bhotúin.</i>	You have to learn from your mistakes.

17

Stage 3

R.	<i>Cén fáth go ndéanann tú botún mar sin nuair atá an rud ceart ar eolas agat?</i>	Why do you make a mistake like that when know the correct thing?
J.	<i>B'fhéidir tá tú ag iarraidh deir é just chun faigh é amach agus níl tú ag thabhairt a lán smaointeamh air.</i>	Maybe you are just trying to say it to get it out and you are not giving it a lot of thought.
R.	<i>Nuair atá sé ráite an mbíonn a fhios agat féin go bhfuil sé mícheart?</i>	And when you have said it do you know yourself that it is wrong?
A.	<i>Tá sé mar an gcéanna le obair scríofa, má tá rud éigin mícheart, ghlaonn an múinteoir ort agus an nóiméad a feachann tú air tá fhios agat tá sé mícheart.</i>	It is the same with written work, if something is wrong, the teacher calls you and the minute you look at it you know it is wrong.

18

...ar lean

R.	Cén fáth go ndeir tú an rud mícheart nuair atá an rud ceart ar eolas agat?	Why do you say the incorrect thing when you know the correct thing?
J.	<i>Mar nuair atá tú ag dul timpeall le do chairde is Béarla a bíonn á labhairt agat agus ansin nuair a thagann tú ar scoil is é Gaeilge agus caithfidh tú smaoineamh faoi.</i>	Because when you are going around with your friends it is English that you speak and when you come to school it is Irish and you have to think about it.
R.	Aon tuairim agatsa A?	Have you any opinion A?
A.	<i>Ní smaoiníonn tú. (...ar lean)</i>	You don't think.

R.	An mbíonn tú ag smaoineamh níos mó nuair a bhíonn tú ag caint leis an múinteoir nó le do chairde?	Do you think more when you are talking to the teacher or to your friends?
J.	<i>Leis an múinteoir mar muna deir tú an rud ceart, beidh sí, déarfadh sí tá sé mícheart.</i>	With the teacher because if you don't say it correctly, she will be, she will say it is incorrect.

C.	<i>Nuair a bhíonn tú ag caint leis an múinteoir, roimh téann tú suas, bíonn tú ag smaoineamh ar cad a bhfuil tú chun rá leis. Like roimh cuireann tú do lámh suas caithfidh tú smaoineamh. Cad é an Ghaeilge ar an rud atá tú ag iarraidh?</i>	When you are talking to the teacher, before you go up, you are thinking about what you are going to say to him. Like before you put up your hand you have to think. What is the Irish for the thing you are looking for?
----	--	--

D.	<i>Only faigheann tú an Ghaeilge maith i rang 6 agus tá tú ag caint leis an Ghaeilge eile.</i>	You only get 'good Irish' in 6 th class and you are used to the other Irish.
N.	<i>Nuair a léann tú an gramadach bíonn níos mó Gaeilge maith agat.</i>	When you read the grammar you have more 'good Irish'.

R.	An gceartaíonn sibh a chéile riamh?	Do you ever correct one another?
G.	<i>Ní it depends. B'fhéidir if tá tú ag caint Béarla a lán, beidh tú ceartaithe.</i>	No, it depends. Maybe if you are speaking English a lot you will be corrected.

Findings

- very good fluency and communicative ability
- language acquisition limited to school context
- Students interpret school norm as 'not speaking Eng'
- given an opportunity to see and hear themselves many students :
 - thought that their proficiency was not as good as they had previously thought
 - noticed their code-mixing
 - could identify weaknesses and correct some of their errors
 - did not notice errors with copula and verbal noun unless prompted
 - realised that they 'pick-up' errors from peers
 - stated that they do not monitor their output when conversing with peers

Level of satisfaction

Irish immersion

- They are certainly fluent but I would like them to be more accurate. They become lazy as they become fluent.

French immersion

- I think that it is satisfactory. There are a lot of gaps I think that it could be better in terms of their accuracy, their fluency, their vocabulary ... So it is satisfactory but I would really like to see more improvement

25

Linguistic errors

Irish immersion

- The same errors are there and I assume that there must be deep linguistic reasons that the same errors emerge again and again.

French immersion

- *But the habit has been formed I guess and it doesn't matter enough because, 'You understood that I meant that I was seven years old so who cares ... whether I said 'j'ai or je suis'? I don't think they verbalise that to me.*
- *... It does get frustrating that way.*

26

Influence of English

Irish immersion

- ...almost every one of them is from an English speaking background, they speak English naturally at home and they translate very quickly and naturally and that is what emerges from them more than, 'how would you say that correctly in Irish?'

French immersion

- *They do translate from English to French and as a result they use idioms very inappropriately*

27

Teacher strategies

Irish immersion

- I suppose I use humour more than anything else to encourage them. I would hate to damage in any way the natural enthusiasm that most of them have.

French immersion

- *Humour. Lots of teachers, they make fun when a person says 'Je suis fini'. 'Oh you're dead.' So humour I would definitely say*

28

Focus on form in content lessons

Irish immersion

- If someone said something like "he is man" in the middle of a history lesson I'd stop immediately and correct it – something very basic, but you couldn't correct every single one.

French immersion

- *Teachers are trying to do language across the curriculum as much as they can. So there is a lot of pressure, I see it now. To get the content across and so you don't always have the time to work on the language.*

29

Teaching materials

Irish immersion

- But there are a lot of problems as well regarding resources for the senior classes. It is very difficult to source interesting reading materials in particular.

French immersion

- You know, like if you go down a few levels where it's actually for the first language speakers, the content is seen as too babyish and they don't like it.

30

Exposure to L2 outside school

Irish immersion

- They speak Irish in the classroom, out in the playground for the most part. The place where we fail is the language outside of school. Not a word is spoken outside of school and I don't know if we can have an influence there.

French immersion (Toronto)

- I guess the extent to which you can create a true immersion setting in the school is dependent on the people that are there and their commitment toward it. Beyond the walls of the school it becomes even harder to build any kind of immersion environment because you can't use it in the community. There simply wouldn't be places where they can go and use French.

Exposure to L2 outside school

French immersion (Ottawa)

- It's very easy, probably their neighbour speaks French. Even someone in their family, their grandparents often will only speak to them in French.

32

School planning

Irish immersion

- There are very few meetings where it is not discussed, as that is really the foundation-stone of the school really.

French immersion

- It depends on the principal
- We meet as French immersion teachers and we meet as division teachers
- We feel very isolated.
- I think it's the dual-track that's preventing this (meetings).

33

Dual-track V Immersion centre

French immersion

- *I think that comes from the environment. It might be different, I don't know, if the whole school itself is French, and then you'll hear it, you'll live it day in day out ... But when it's kind of just in the classroom and when you walk out of the French immersion classroom, around you is English and all that, and you don't get as much exposure ... But being just artificially like, a few hours a day in a classroom and the only person you really listen to who's speaking French is the teacher, and even you turn around, they will speak to their classmates in English.*

34

Student willingness to speak L2

Irish immersion

- I think that they are positive when they are compelled to do it. When they are in school and they know that there is a rule, I don't think that any of them are negative but because it is easier for them to speak English that is what they do when they meet each other outside.

French immersion

- Amongst themselves usually when they're doing it for a project they'll be usually in English. I have to really encourage them "Can we try and do this for half an hour in French today?"

35

Student willingness to speak L2

Irish immersion

- I always have to encourage them (to speak Irish) even though they are in an all-Irish school, they lose it and they revert to English again when you are not listening to them or looking at them ... it's very difficult to motivate them especially in the senior classes

French immersion

- I would say it's my biggest frustration as a French immersion teacher - the children will not speak French to each other in a social environment.

36

Professional development needs

Irish immersion

- The thing that worries me the most is my own Irish
- There is an urgent need for an in-service or an induction module on immersion education because I think that there are certain things the teachers don't understand.

French immersion

- I would just like to network with other teachers more to discuss strategies that work for them.

37

Teacher interviews

- teachers generally satisfied with their students' proficiency in French/Irish but room for improvement
- frustration that the same errors persist over time
- identified common errors in immersion students' French/Irish
- they adopted strategies to improve proficiency

38

Teacher interviews

- dissatisfaction with range and suitability of teaching materials and resources
- lack of exposure to French/Irish outside the classroom (FI) and school
- difficult to motivate students to speak French/Irish
- lack of opportunities for FI teachers to meet as a group
- lowering of expectations by some FI teachers due to lack of support

39

Implications for pedagogy

- special attention to particular structures
 - the copula and the manner in which it is taught
 - the verbal noun
 - dependent forms of verbs
- provide opportunities for 'pushed output'
- provide opportunities for reflection
- focus on form activities
- balance experiential approach with a more analytic approach – emphasis on both form and meaning after 2nd class/grade

40

Implications for immersion education generally

- greater support for immersion teachers
- provide opportunities for immersion teachers to share best-practice
- maximise potential of school as speech community
- despite greater opportunities for language production in Irish immersion school context non target-like forms in learners' interlanguage persisted
- there may be limitations to the accuracy that can be achieved where exposure to the target language is confined to the school context
- balance content and language objectives, encouragement and enforcing school norms

41

'I like to speak Irish but if I speak English I am in big trouble. Sometimes I think that it is only a language.'

(Irish immersion student)

Go raibh maith agaibh
Merci
Muchas Gracias
Thank you

42