

The Need for a Long-Term, Comprehensive Approach to EAL Instruction in Irish Schools

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The Republic of Ireland is changing. This sentiment can be heard in all circles of Irish society, particularly around discussions related to places of learning. In the second half of the 1990s during the economic boom known as The Celtic Tiger, a shift in migration occurred. Following a long history of emigration, inward migration surpassed outward migration for the first time (Central Statistics Office, 2003; Beggs and Mangan, 2006). Ever since, discussions around migration in Ireland are responding to a changed context. As Ireland has embraced immigration, particularly from the newest EU accession states, in order to address employment shortages, its efforts to improve services for people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds seem to have been based on an assumption that demographic changes are temporary, particularly related to the teaching of English as an additional language at both primary and post-primary levels.

Three factors seem to have influenced the development of an English language support programme in the Republic of Ireland: the ideology of a homogenous Irish-English bilingual education system, the development of policy in isolation with limited consideration of the body of academic research and experiences in other settings related to language teaching and the sense that the demographic changes in schools are temporary.

The impact of a homogenous Irish-English bilingual education system

Before examining the current entitlements offered to English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) students in Irish schools, it is valuable to consider the unique ideological context present in the education system in the Republic of Ireland¹. The

¹ This paper addresses the teaching of English as an additional language in the Republic of Ireland, and when the adjective Irish is used, it refers to schools in the Republic. It does not address education in Northern Ireland, which operates under a different distinct system.

Department of Education and Science is the central decision-making body for the country's schools at all levels. Unlike in many other international settings, there is no equivalent of the Local Education Authority (LEA). Therefore, the Department determines all policy and each individual school's Board of Management implements these policies. All children, including refugees, asylum-seekers and children of migrants, are eligible for free primary and post-primary education.

One important aspect of both the primary and post-primary curricula in the Republic of Ireland is the teaching of Irish or *an Ghaeilge*. According to *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Foley and Lalor, 1995), the Constitution, Irish remains the first official language. While English is the mode of communication for the majority of people, Irish is afforded special status in schools. Therefore, a tradition of bilingual education has been a key aspect of education provision. The majority of schools are English-medium, where the Irish language is taught as a mandatory subject and allocated 40 minutes each day. The number of Irish-medium schools, or *gaelscoileanna*, has grown in recent years, with many *gaelscoileanna* established outside of the official *Gaeltacht*, or Irish-speaking, communities.

How does the presence of the Irish language relate to the teaching of English as an additional language? It is important to consider the impact of an ideology affording special status to the Irish language. Though difficult to demonstrate, perhaps a subtle discomfort remains regarding the funding of English teaching based on the belief that Irish was suppressed by English. A significant amount of special funding continues to be directed towards the development of the Irish language. At the very least, Irish-English bilingualism is afforded a high-status. Students who sit qualification exams through Irish receive higher marks, and knowing Irish is a benefit and occasionally a requirement for employment, notably for primary school teachers. This is in contrast with the status given to other languages spoken in Ireland. Little attention has been given to the range of allochthonous languages now spoken in Ireland, and formal education programmes have not responded to their presence or value apart from the opportunity to take a Leaving Certificate Examination, the tertiary post-primary

examinations, in a range of primarily European languages.

This distinction between high-status and low-status bilingualism is highlighted in two quotes from two government ministers. When announcing a programme to encourage the speaking of Irish in the home with a budget of €300,000, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Eamon Ó Cuiv stated, "What I am asking is that you don't deny your children a major advantage in life. Even later in life, children brought up bilingually acquire third and fourth languages more easily than their monolingual cousins" (Gaeltacht parents are urged..., 2004).

In contrast, the Minister of Education, Mary Hanafin, when discussing the provision of English language support teaching, argued, "Having spoken with the principals and teachers involved in this area, they say that while there may be an issue about the teaching of the language in the school, there is a bigger difficulty in that English is not spoken by the parents in the home" (*Parliamentary Debates*, 2006).

In addition to an education system that affords special status to one form of bilingualism, there is a long-standing ideology that until recently Ireland was a homogenous society with little experience of diversity. While largely a myth, schools have traditionally been organised around this perspective (O'Loingsigh, 2001). The choice of schooling offered does not match the diverse cultural, religious and language backgrounds of students even though the Constitution specifically enshrines the right of parents to determine the form of education for their children (Foley and Lalor, 1995). Though not explicit, perhaps this presents an opportunity for parents to petition for an educational provision in a medium other than English or Irish.

This right of parental choice regarding education is best demonstrated in the procedures for school enrolment. In theory, parents can enrol their child in any school. In practice, this benefits long-term residents as schools recognised in the community as excellent maintain waiting lists where children are added to the list several years in advance of enrolment. Therefore, new arrivals to a community are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to school choice. According to research carried out in Galway, a city in the West of Ireland, the number of

students learning English as an additional language varied significantly between different schools in the same community. Whereas four schools reported having no EAL students enrolled, three other schools reported EAL populations representing 20% of the schools' enrolments (Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006). Therefore, the current enrolment procedure, grounded in parent choice, may be causing *de facto* discrimination. Even Minister Hanafin has acknowledged the subtle ways schools may deny enrolment to EAL students, Travelers² and students with special educational needs (Hanafin audit to tackle school "racism", 2006).

The impact of policy development in isolation

Now that a general overview of some unique aspects present in the Irish education system has been given, it is possible to examine the response of the government to the presence of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in schools. In general, the Department of Education seems to have developed policies and programmes in isolation without examining fully experiences in other countries who have been teaching a majority language to immigrants as well as the body of academic literature in the area.

As a case in point, the preferred term in use by the Department for students learning English has been "non-English-speaking non-nationals" (DES, 2006a). This term, which encourages a deficit perspective when considering the needs and abilities of bilingual children, is still used in official documents. New terms have been informally proposed to remove the negative sentiment including "newcomer", favoured by Minister Hanafin, as well as "the New Irish". While these terms remove the deficit perspective, they fail to accurately address the language learning needs of students. One state body, the National Council for Curriculum and Achievement, the Irish equivalent of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England, has adopted the term "English as an additional language" (NCCA, 2006).

To further illustrate the way the current entitlement of EAL children seems to have been developed in isolation, it is important to trace the development of schemes to address this educational area. The first

² The term Travellers refers to an indigenous majority group in Ireland that traditionally followed a nomadic lifestyle and is given protection from discrimination under Irish law.

formal provision for teaching English as an additional language was established in 1992, a visiting teacher programme where peripatetic teachers travelled between various schools mostly around Dublin where refugees had been placed by the United Nations. As inward migration increased, the Department of Education established the Refugee Language Support Unit at Trinity College and commissioned this organisation to write a report titled *Meeting the Language Needs of Refugees in Ireland* (Little, 2000). A scheme for English Language Support was established in 2000, and it remains the central programme for meeting the needs of EAL learners in both primary and post-primary schools.

The key aspect of the programme is the creation of a new teaching position, the English Language Support Teacher or ELST. All students are placed in a mainstream classroom based on their age, which researchers would suggest is a positive step towards creating an inclusive model for EAL instruction (Coelho, 1998). The role of the ELST is to provide a programme of support to help children develop a minimum level of English competence in order to participate in the mainstream class. No formal qualifications are required for ELSTs, and limited training is available, as explained later in this paper. Mirroring common practice in primary schools, the position of ELST commonly is rotated among teachers, and the position often is viewed as a flexible teacher who can easily be called on to substitute for class teachers.

The predominant recommended teaching approach is to withdraw students in small-groups or as individuals from the mainstream classroom for special English tuition (IILT, 2003). The withdrawal of EAL students is typically the sole teaching model in practice in schools (Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006). In contrast, a more inclusive approach to EAL teaching is recommended in the body of academic literature (Coelho, 1998; Moore, 1999), and the choice of teaching approach in Irish schools is juxtaposed against a general movement towards a supported integration approach and ideally a bilingual model in other international settings (see Martin, 2003; McGivern & Eddy, 1999; Tasmania Department of Education, 2006). As academics explain, a model that withdraws students to work with a special teacher effectively assigns the responsibility for teaching English to the

support teacher rather than the whole school community (Glenn and de Jong, 1996).

To support the hiring of English language support teachers, funding rules for the English language support programme were established in 2000 as summarised in the tables below.

Primary Funding Scheme

Number of EAL Students	0-2	3-8	9-13	14-27	28+
Funding Allowance	€0	€6348.69	€9523.04	1 full-time ELST	2 full-time ELSTs

Source: DES, 2006a

Post-Primary Funding Scheme

Number of EAL Students	1	2	3	4	5-6	7	8	9
Additional Teaching Hours	3	4	6	8	10	10.5	12	13.5

Number of EAL Students	10	11	12	13	14-27	28+
Additional Teaching Hours	15	16.5	18	19.5	22 (1 full-time ELST)	44 (2 full-time ELSTs)

Source: DES, 2006b

In addition, schools that qualify for a full-time English language support teacher also receive a one-time start-up allowance of €634.87 and an annual top-up continuance grant of €314.

To provide examples of how funding is distributed, a primary school with six EAL students enrolled will receive a block grant of €6348.69 and no additional grants. A primary school with 20 students will have one full-time ELST, will receive a start-up allowance in the first year of the programme and will be given an annual continuance grant of €314. Similarly, a post-primary school with ten students will receive funding for 15 teaching hours with no additional grants. A post-primary school with 30 EAL students will qualify for two full-time ELSTs and will also receive the same initial start-up allowance and annual continuance grants.

As illustrated in the tables, the funding rules are not strictly per pupil, particularly at the primary school level. Also, no funding is provided to primary schools until three EAL students are enrolled in a school. In addition, when schools reach an enrolment above 24 pupils, no additional teaching posts are allocated. In extreme cases, the Department has responded to petitions from specific schools to sanction a third post, but there are reported cases where schools have 200 EAL students enrolled and just three ELSTs (*Parliamentary Debates – Seanad Éireann*, 2006). This funding system seems to be causing students to receive unequal levels of English language support depending on the enrolment in their particular schools (Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006).

In addition to hiring full-time ELSTs directly and allocating block grants to individual schools to fund part-time ELST positions, the Department funds Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), the new name given to the Refugee Language Support Unit mentioned earlier. The Department has assigned responsibility for EAL instruction to this organisation. IILT is charged with several tasks related to English language teaching. The organisation provides English classes for adult refugees in centres across the country. In relation to primary and post-primary EAL instruction, IILT developed frameworks based on the both the primary and post-primary curricula, created two revised editions of the European Language Portfolio intended as all-encompassing assessment tools, has written some additional curriculum materials and leads one-day annual training seminars for ELSTs.

Minister for Education Mary Hanafin reported that in April 2006, as part of the language support programme, 261 ELSTs were working in secondary schools and an additional 541 ELSTs were working in primary schools at a cost of more than €46.5 million (*Parliamentary Debates – Dáil Éireann*, 2006). While this demonstrates a substantial financial commitment to funding English language support teaching positions on the part of the Department of Education and Science, the amount of funding directed toward professional development and curriculum material creation is comparatively limited. With an annual budget of €1.4 million that remains unchanged since 1999 (IILT, 2006), the IILT appears to have made adjustments to its services in order to compensate for the limited funding it receives. In the past

European Language Portfolios (ELPs) were distributed to schools free of charge, but they now cost €2 for Primary ELPs and €2.50 for Post-Primary ELPs. In addition, the one-day training seminars held around the country in both spring and autumn have now been restricted to new ELSTs (IILT, 2007). Of note, no training has been developed to target mainstream classroom teachers. Because EAL students spend the majority of the day with their mainstream class teacher, it seems crucial that these teachers at minimum have an awareness of the learning needs of their EAL students and ideally a range of strategies to help them participate in the classroom, particular for older students who are expected to learn large quantities of subject information through a new language (McKeon, 1994; Sears, 1998).

Beyond the limited amount of funding directed at teacher training and curriculum development, a further indication that the policy may have been developed in isolation is the two-year limit to entitlement for EAL learners. This is enforced regardless of the individual needs of particular students, and it seems to indicate a lack of awareness of research related to the time required to reach academic fluency, with estimates ranging from four to ten years (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta *et al.*, 2000). A disproportionate increase in the percentage of immigrant children being directed toward special needs education, who currently represent approximately 40% of new referrals for special needs assessment to a Dublin-based voluntary body (Ring, 2006), could be related to this two-year time limit for entitlement which may fail to address the long-term educational needs of EAL students.

The impact of viewing migration changes as temporary phenomena

A general conclusion related to EAL instruction in Ireland seems to be the abiding sense that migration changes are “temporary” and a temporary solution is all that is required. Because of the entitlement limitation as well as the perceived “transient nature of the non-national student population” (DES, 2003: 16), ELST positions are temporary in schools, and there seems to be a lack of professional recognition of expertise in the area or even the opportunity for upskilling. There seems to be an on-going assumption that immigration will end in the future, that new immigrants are in Ireland only temporarily

before returning to their home countries and that a long-term policy is unnecessary. As a case in point, many EAL students are offered an exemption from learning Irish, perhaps out of a sense that they will not become long-term members of Irish society, even though not learning Irish may have a significant impact on future education and job prospects. Furthermore, even though there is a growing awareness that funding is inadequate, the current levels of funding for curriculum development and teacher training remain unchanged since 2000.

Rather than addressing the needs of EAL students at a macro level, a small programme that has a limit to entitlement based solely on time rather than language ability or long-term needs may be insufficient for moving all children to the point of being able to fully participate in the learning environment. In addition, with the current form of instruction that emphasises withdrawing students, a whole-school approach to EAL instruction, as advocated by many researchers (Genesee, 1994; Turner, 1997), may be difficult to cultivate. As these researchers explain, engagement with parents, class teacher, support teacher and students is crucial towards developing imaginative support structures that address the long-term process towards academic fluency in an inclusive manner.

Towards improved policy and practice

While there are many aspects of the current EAL provision that could benefit from re-examination, the following seem to be the areas of highest priority for future advocacy to impact on the experiences of EAL learners. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has recently written guidelines for teaching English as an additional language which articulate two primary needs to improve policy and practice in this area: “appropriate support structures and resources” and “guidance for schools and teachers” (NCCA, 2006).

Supporting this idea, the first step towards an improved provision could be for all parties concerned to accept the need for a long-term response. Policy and practice that would address both the long-term needs of individual students as well as be grounded in the sense that the need to teach EAL in schools is on-going could encourage integration and high expectations for achievement for all students.

A valuation of bilingualism to incorporate other languages within the current Irish-English bilingual model, where all languages are recognised, celebrated and, ideally, strengthened, could be another positive step. Because the Irish education system already has a long tradition of supporting bilingualism, particularly in primary school where all teachers are second language teachers (teaching Irish or English depending on the medium of instruction), this knowledge can be applied to teaching English as an additional language as well as supporting the retention and development of all languages represented in schools.

Then, when considering academic research as well as experiences in other settings, the arbitrary two-year time limit to entitlement, which fails to consider individual needs of learners and their long-term integration and successful acquisition of the curriculum, could be reviewed. In addition, the Department could examine and evaluate various approaches to teaching a majority language to immigrant students (see Extra and Yagmur, 2002), drawing conclusions based on academic research carried out both in Ireland and other settings.

Of particular importance seems to be the need to address teacher awareness and to develop the skills of all teachers in order to move towards a comprehensive, whole-school model of EAL instruction. This could lead to re-examining the current practice of withdrawing students for separate lessons in order to put into practice more imaginative and inclusive approaches that are responsive to individual students’ learning needs.

In summary, policies and practices should be grounded in an awareness of the long-term presence of linguistic diversity in Ireland so that a long-term provision can be developed. The current “stopgap” approach could be replaced with a comprehensive approach to EAL instruction that values all languages and assists students towards long-term language development.

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