**Primary Teachers' Experiences in Preparing to Teach Irish: Views on Promoting the Language and Language Proficiency**

Claire M. Dunne, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland

Corresponding author: claire.dunne@mie.ie

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# Primary Teachers' Experiences in Preparing to Teach Irish: Views on Promoting the Language and Language Proficiency

Claire M. Dunne, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

The present study explores the process of becoming a primary level teacher of Irish, the official yet a minority language in Ireland. Since all primary level teachers must teach Irish, becoming a primary teacher in Ireland is bound up in complex ways with the process of becoming a teacher of a minority language and with personal attitudes to, and views on, the language itself. The current study analyses similarities and differences in views relating to teachers' role in promoting the language, as well as issues in proficiency in the language, at the beginning and end of initial teacher education. Also examined is the extent to which above-average self-reported proficiency in Irish influences the experience of teaching Irish. Data is derived from responses to closed and supplementary open-ended questionnaire items administered to two different groups of pre-service teachers: at the beginning (n=75) and the end of initial teacher education (n=91), and is supplemented with data from interviews conducted with a subgroup of Group 2 (n=30). Data from this mixed methods study show that changes occur in the way teachers conceive of their future roles as teachers of Irish, and reveal the need for more support in aspects of their role such as nurturing positive attitudes to Irish amongst children and a desire for shared responsibility in promoting the language more generally.

*Keywords:* Irish language, teacher education, proficiency

For primary teachers in Ireland, a significant part of their generalist educational role relates to the teaching of the Irish language, the official yet a minority language in Ireland. Though they will teach over 11 different subjects in their role as primary teachers in the classroom, their role as language teachers extends beyond the classroom walls and is of critical importance in the national language revitalisation and maintenance initiative. This language teaching role is quite complex compared to teachers of other minority or heritage languages when it is taken into account that the vast majority of teachers are not native speakers, and that the children they will teach too are usually second or additional language speakers, especially in English-medium schools where Irish is taught as a subject only. Despite these challenges in transmitting the language to the next generation, data relating to practising teachers in Irish consistently show that teachers have an above average interest and ability in Irish (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994), and this commitment to the language may form part of their professional and

personal identity. It is not known, however, whether their positive views and dispositions are formed prior to or during initial teacher education, and whether they are further modified by experiences during their college programme and in the classroom. This research paper presents the perspectives of pre-service primary teachers (herein referred to as teachers) during initial teacher education in relation to aspects of their role in teaching the language in the classroom, and their wider role as key players in the revitalisation and maintenance initiative.

First the research methods employed in this study are presented. Then the sociolinguistic context of the Irish language is explored in order to situate the important role that primary teachers take on in teaching Irish. The profile of teachers when they enter initial teacher education, as well as the stability and change in their views during their Bachelor of Education programme is then outlined. Next, teachers' awareness of and views relating to their significant role in revitalising and promoting the Irish language at different points of their career are presented. Issues of proficiency in the minority language are examined as the primary teacher is for the most part the main role model for language use. Also explored is the influence that high competence in the target language has on teachers' views and role perceptions.

### Research Methods

Pre-service teachers bring to initial teacher education several beliefs about how a language should be taught, attitudes to the language itself, and perceptions of their future role. Several studies exist in Ireland revealing the kinds of beliefs and attitudes that the general public as well as practising teachers have (CILAR, 1975; Harris, Forde, Archer, Nic Fhearaile, & O'Gorman, 2006; Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1984; Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). Corresponding data was not until now available for pre-service teachers. In addition to this, data regarding how teachers *feel* about taking on their future role as teachers of Irish is lacking. This study aimed to address this gap. In the absence of any existing instrument suitable for administration to pre-service teachers and teachers in early professional practice to examine together role perceptions and views on proficiency, the questionnaires and interview schedule used in the present study were developed.

The study explores how the dependent variables of role perceptions, are influenced by the independent variable: experiences during initial teacher education and early classroom practice. Broadly, the aims of this study are to investigate the following questions:

(a) What are the characteristics and role perceptions of pre-service teachers, and how do these compare to the national profile?

(b) What changes, if any, happen to these role perceptions during initial teacher education?

(c) Do teachers with reported higher proficiency in Irish have the same experience as teachers with reported lower proficiency?

A cross-sectional approach was implemented for part of this study. (The data reported here is part of a larger study which also included longitudinal dimensions, see Dunne, 2015). Data discussed are derived from the study of two groups of teachers, one at the beginning of first year (Group 1 n=75) and another at the end of their final year (Group 2 n=91). This allowed the researcher to obtain two snapshot views of pre-service teachers: those who have just begun initial teacher education with those who have just completed it, thus allowing the comparison of the two perspectives and analysis of the impact that initial teacher education, and later early classroom practice, potentially has on role perceptions and views on proficiency. Cross-sectional approaches to the study of language beliefs, attitudes and role perceptions have been implemented by various researchers (e.g. Kern, 1995; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007). A cross-sectional approach, looking at two different populations e.g. beginner and advanced learner, novice and expert teachers, first year students and final year students, helps us to understand the belief systems at different stages of the process. It allows us to make comparisons between the two groups and to reflect on changes in views that are present between the two groups. Hence, the cross-sectional aspect of this study compares views at two important points in the process of becoming a teacher of Irish in a relatively short space of time.

*Research instruments*

The research instruments designed for this study mirror approaches used in other studies of language attitudes and role perceptions, e.g. questionnaires used by Horwitz (1985), Mori (1999), Nikitina and Furuoka (2007), Sakui and Gaies (1999), and interviews used by Riley (2009). A mixed methods approach was chosen to explore teachers' views. This included a questionnaire containing closed questions and open-ended supplementary questions, as well as

an interview schedule, thus combining the advantages of quantitative and qualitative data gathering.

Questionnaires are seen to be easy to administer and are not time intensive (Dörnyei, 2007). A questionnaire was used in this study to draw comparisons between the views of the two groups, and also between teachers in this study and the general public. As well as asking for certain biographical details, common questionnaire items were used from other national surveys conducted by Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin (1994) on behalf of Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann. Five answer options were available to respondents, usually ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'.

A qualitative element was also included in the data collection, too, in the form of open-ended supplementary questions in the questionnaire to allow teachers to expand on or further clarify responses they gave to particular items.  As well as this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subgroup of Group 2 at the end of initial teacher education to complement the questionnaire and allow a smaller group to provide a richer and in-depth description of early classroom practice.

*Piloting*

Following several drafts of the research instruments, questionnaire and interview schedule, the researcher undertook a pilot phase of data collection as advised by several other researchers e.g. Dörnyei (2007). The purpose of this pilot phase was to examine the clarity of the wording in the questionnaire, to investigate the amount of time it took for them to complete the questionnaire, to discuss any other key experiences or issues, that teachers felt were not covered in the questionnaire at present. Three students in second year who had experienced the entire first year course, and two practising teachers who had recently graduated were invited to complete the draft questionnaire. Some amendments were made to the research instruments in light of the pilot study. In terms of the questionnaire, these concerned layout, amending particular items, clarity and wording, and finally the translation of the questionnaire to Irish.

Practising teachers also agreed to take part in the pilot interview. The pilot interviews highlight issues in the following areas: relationships with teachers in face to face interviews; the treatment of contradictory beliefs, attitudes and role perceptions; the need for a focus on affective dimensions of learning; the exploratory nature of the study; and the need for a flexible

interviewing style. A redraft of the research instruments was undertaken, in consultation with the research supervisor, immediately following the pilot study so that all suggestions were fresh in the researcher's mind.

The source, where relevant, of the questionnaire items, any amendments made, and the type of scoring/ analysis undertaken is outlined in Table 1 below. In order to examine the unique context of teaching Irish, some original items were also added e.g. in relation to how teachers feel about their role in revitalising and maintaining the language. For open ended supplementary questions, the responses were coded. Representative comments under each theme were then compiled (see Dunne, 2015 for a full list).

In sum, the approach to gathering data that chosen for this study was as follows: Questionnaires were administered to both groups at the beginning and end of their programme. Qualitative data was also sought in the form of open-ended supplementary questionnaire responses, and interviews were conducted with a third of the teachers in their final year, to provide insights about how teachers feel about the issues of proficiency and promotion of the target language during their early classroom experiences.

### *Measuring Change*

In analysing discrete questionnaire items, Levene's Test to assess equality of variance was first undertaken (Levene, 1960). This test established whether or not there was an equal variance in Group 1 and Group 2 for each item. The categories of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were combined, as were the categories of 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'. The neutral category 'neither agree nor disagree' was retained. Hence, the previously five-point scale now has three points. The data In Tables 2 and 3 are the results of Chi Square tests undertaken to examine any significant differences across these three points: 'agree' (strongly agree/ agree), 'neither agree nor disagree', and 'disagree' (disagree/strongly disagree) with each item.

Table 1

*Part 3 of the Questionnaire Relating to Views on Promoting Irish and Language Proficiency*

| Name of Scale | Source | Type of Scale | Scoring |
|---|---|---|---|
| Irish as an ethnic symbol | Irish as an ethnic symbol ITÉ (1993) | 4 positively and negatively worded items<br><br>*item concerning independence from Britain omitted | Items analysed discretely |
| Teaching of Irish | INTO (1985) | 6 positively and negatively worded items<br><br>*Item concerning teaching Irish to EAL learners included | Items analysed discretely |
| Teacher proficiency | Original scale | 5 positively worded items<br><br>4 open-ended supplementary parts | Items analysed discretely<br><br>Open-ended responses coded thematically |
| Role of primary teacher in the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish | Original scale | 6 positively worded items<br><br>5 open-ended supplementary parts | Items analysed discretely<br><br>Open-ended responses coded thematically |

## Sociolinguistic Context of Teaching Irish

Defining the status of the Irish language in Ireland today is complex. It is a minority language in the sense that its pool of speakers is a significant minority; but it is the official language of the State and so under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) it cannot technically be classified as a minority language. For the purposes of this paper, the term minority language is used indicative of the minority of speakers. Irish can be described as an autochthonous language like Welsh in the United Kingdom, where the language is part of intergenerational transmission – L1 of a speech community and the L2 in educational contexts for significant numbers of learners/speakers (Ó Laoire & Harris, 2006). It should be noted that the case of Irish as minority language differs from other minority languages because of four notable characteristics (Harris, 2008a):

(1) The weak position of the language in Irish-speaking regions or *Gaeltacht* heartlands at the time when the revitalisation initiative of the state originally began
(2) Despite its minority status in terms of number of speakers, it was installed as the first official language of the new state
(3) The failure in the interim to improve the rate of intergenerational transmission of the language within families and homes – either in the *Gaeltacht* Irish-speaking areas in the West, or in the country more generally
(4) The heavy reliance placed on the education system to compensate for this failure of natural transmission.

When revitalisation initiatives began in Ireland in the 1880s, the Irish language was already in a vulnerable position. Efforts were made in different sectors of society to increase citizens' exposure to the language. The primary education system was an obvious vehicle through which to give the next generation opportunities to learn Irish. With the foundation of the Free State in 1922, the revitalisation of Irish largely centred on the education system. Coolahan (1981, p. 40) goes so far as to say that the spread of the Irish language was the most important function of the school programme. Though there was a lot of optimism surrounding the revitalisation of Irish, indeed there are many accounts of the commitment that primary teachers showed in relation to translating educational materials for school children (Ní Chuilleanáin, 2014), there are early reports from the national teachers' trade union (INTO) after only a few years that their responsibility in teaching and promoting Irish was becoming burdensome, and that the government's ambitious aims to redress language shift through the education system were quite difficult to achieve. Factors attributed to this lack of sufficient progress were outlined by the INTO in 1941 and later in a White Paper in 1980 which identified the lack of support for Irish outside the school, inadequate use of Irish as a teaching medium of other subjects, and the low level of proficiency of many teachers. The most tangible support on a day-to-day basis for the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish continues to reside with primary school teachers. The survival and promotion of Irish rest on the "attitudes, efforts, and commitment of individual schools and teachers in a way that other subjects do not" (Harris et al., 2006, p. 170). Teachers can therefore, though interested and invested in the language, feel isolated in their role in the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish.

*Unique characteristics of beginning primary teachers*

Data from national attitudes surveys show that the positive views of practising teachers in relation to Irish differentiate them somewhat from the general public, especially their reported higher level of proficiency. Often in language atttiudes research static measures of language competence are sought such as whether a person attended an immersion school or the languages that were spoken in the home growing up (e.g. Garrett, 2003; Lasagabaster, 2007). While these biographical details are shown to correlate with high proficiency, as evidenced in the comparison of pre-service teachers to other teenagers nationally, the identity of a primary teacher can also influence one's investment in the language. Therefore in the current study, pre-service teachers were asked not only to indicate their experience of language in the home and in school but also to indicate their current perceived competence in the language. Teachers with reported high levels of Irish not surprisingly in the main also reported exposure to the target language during their childhood years, but there was a number of teachers who did not experience this contact with the language in the earlier stages of their life who nonetheless identified as proficient language speakers through their role as teachers. Self-report data in relation to language proficiency was considered a more inclusive measure to identify very competent and confident speakers of Irish. Self-report data in relation to language competence have been sought from the general public as well as serving primary teachers in the past, e.g. CILAR, (1975); INTO (1985). Proficiency scales used in other national surveys are utilised in the current study to allow for meaningful comparison.

The extent to which pre-service teachers upon entry to the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme have a distinct profile is examined by comparing them to other secondary school students in their final year. In the Murtagh study (2007) which surveyed students in Irish-medium and English-medium schools, over 80% of students who attended Irish-medium secondary schools report 'native-speaker ability in Irish' and the rest of this group report being able to take part in 'most conversations'. In the current study, two-thirds of students who attended Irish-medium primary schools report 'native-like ability' and the rest report being able to take part in 'most conversations'. This is not surprising as students in immersion education contexts consistently show higher competence in the target language.

The findings in relation to pre-service teachers who attended English-medium schools are more interesting because they highlight the influence of their emergent identity as a primary

school teacher on language competence. No students from English-medium schools in the Murtagh study (2007) report 'native speaker ability' even those undertaking the higher level course, but almost half report being able to partake in 'most conversations' (48.1%). In the current study of teachers in their first month in teacher education, a small minority of teachers who attended English-medium schools report having 'native speaker ability' (4.2%), and over half of them report being able to partake in most conversations' (57.0%). By combining the categories of 'native speaker' and 'most conversations', there are 48.0% reporting high proficiency in Murtagh's study of Leaving Certificate students but 61.2% in the present study. So, more beginning teachers who attended English-medium secondary schools report high proficiency than their secondary school peers. There is also a tendency for pre-service teachers to have more positive attitudes to Irish, to have attended course in an Irish-speaking region or *Gaeltacht* presumably to meet the entry requirements for Bachelor of Education (BEd) programmes.

**Stability and Change in Views during Initial Teacher Education**

There are other views that teachers may develop during initial teacher education. The influence of third level education on teacher views, however, is contentious (Peacock, 2001; Woods, 1996;). Some researchers suggest that this period does hold potential for the modification of views because of the pre-service teacher's new pedagogical knowledge and school placement (Almarza, 1996; Borg, 2003; Horwitz, 1985; Johnson, 1994; Kern, 1995; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Riley, 2009; Zheng, 2009). Others disagree however, and claim that teacher education plays only a minor role in modifying pre-existing perceptions (Peacock, 2001; Vibulphol, 2004). Some potential triggers for change in language learning beliefs include age (Tercanlioglu, 2005), and stage of career (Bailey, 1992; Hinton, 1999; Murchan, Loxley, & Johnston, 2009; Zheng, 2009), so the natural maturation that occurs during initial teacher education can lead to changes in views. Peak learning experiences (Maslow, 1959) and critical incidents (Matsumoto, 2007), i.e. significant experiences encountered when learning the target language, such as being understood by a native speaker for the first time or a negative interaction in the classroom may also trigger this change. Studies that deal with language attitudes, particularly attitudes to the Irish language reveal great stability in learners' views over a number of years, and also in the population at large (Murtagh, 2007; Ó

Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). Studies conducted immediately after the learner spends time in the target language community, on the other hand, can often reveal more positive attitudes to the language and to the people who speak it (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Similarly, studies conducted immediately after a teacher has engaged on school placement have also suggested that a change in attitude has occurred (Busch, 2010). Therefore, the experience of school placements and learning periods in the target language community, as well as other experiences in initial teacher education, may have the capacity to develop or modify pre-service teacher views.

In the current study there is a high level of agreement in the views reported by both groups, at the beginning and end of initial teacher education. This is a good sign in some ways considering teachers enter with certain positive traits. Teachers responded to questions concerning the perceived pride, or otherwise, of taking on the role as primary teacher, the importance of Irish in the primary curriculum, the centrality of being a teacher of Irish in their overall self-image, as well as the role they felt they should have in promoting Irish, and the role they feel they are currently assigned by society. Differences between the two groups in proportions agreeing with certain items at the beginning and end of initial teacher education are measured using Chi Square testing. Statistically significant results at $p<0.05$ are indicated with an asterisk in the three tables and text below.

The overwhelming majority of teachers in Group 1 and Group 2, at the beginning and end of their programme, report being 'very proud' or 'proud' when thinking about taking on the professional role and public image of a primary school teacher (96.0% at the beginning and 94.4% at the end). Being a teacher of Irish is 'very central' or 'central' to most people's overall identity as a primary teacher (67.8% compared to 78.7% at the beginning). Though the majority in Group 2 express the centrality of Irish in their overall role, this fall at the high end of the scale may be explained by their awareness of their role in fostering the holistic development of children and not just specific subjects. Over a third at the end of their programme consider Irish to be one of the most important subjects in the curriculum (37.4%) which is less, but not significantly so, than the proportion at the beginning (58.7%). A very large majority in both groups think that the primary teacher is 'very important' or 'important' in the revitalisation of Irish (96.7% at the end and 94.7% at the beginning). Beginning teachers are therefore proud about their role in teaching Irish and it is part of their overall emergent identity as an educator.

Their role in promoting Irish more generally in society is more demanding though. At the beginning 12.0% of teachers in Group 1 think they should have the 'main responsibility' but less than half of this percentage in Group 2 at the end of their programme agree with this level of responsibility (5.6%). Though this is not a significant change, it does fit in with the general trend of teachers asserting that the level of responsibility assigned to them is too great. At the beginning, over half (54.7%) of teachers feel that rather than the 'main responsibility' they should have 'a good deal' of the responsibility but by the end almost two-thirds (65.6%) feel they should have 'a good deal' of the responsibility, which again suggests that teachers would be more comfortable with a lesser degree of responsibility or more shared responsibility.

As seen in Table 2 below only one statistically significant change occurs in the closed questionnaire items, indicated by an asterisk, and this is in relation to the responsibility that teachers perceive society to *currently* assign to them. Over a quarter of teachers (27.0%) at the beginning of initial teacher education feel they are currently assigned the 'main responsibility' whereas at the end, significantly more feel they are currently assigned the 'main responsibility' (44.4%). In total 71.9% of teachers at the beginning feel they are assigned the 'main responsibility' or 'a good deal of the responsibility', while 88.8% of teachers at the end feel they are assigned this level of responsibility.

Table 2

*Percentage of Teachers at the Beginning and End of Initial Teacher Education Agreeing with Statements Regarding the Role of Teachers in Promoting Irish*

| Questionnaire Items | Beginning of programme Group 1 n = 75 | End of programme Group 2 n = 91 |
|---|---|---|
| 20. I feel very proud/ proud about taking on the professional role and public image of a primary school teacher. | 96.0 | 94.4 |
| 21. Irish is one of the most important subjects. | 58.7 | 37.4 |
| 22. My role as a teacher of Irish is very central/ central to my image of myself as a primary teacher. | 78.7 | 67.8 |
| 23. The primary school teacher is very important/ important in the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish in Ireland. | 94.7 | 96.7 |
| **24. The primary teacher *should* have** | | |
| (a) the main responsibility for the revitalisation and maintenance of  Irish. | 12.0 | 5.6 |
| (b) a good deal of the responsibility for the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish | 54.7 | 65.6 |
| **\*26. At present, society assigns to teachers** | | |
| \*(a) the ***main responsibility*** for the revitalisation and maintenance of  Irish | 27.0 | 44.4 |
| (b) ***a good deal*** of the responsibility for the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish | 44.9 | 44.4 |

\*Q26 a: $X^2$ (2, N= 164) = 6.97, p ≤.05

Pressures in relation to the critical role that teachers acquire in promoting Irish are further reinforced in the responses to the open-ended questionnaire responses. Over three quarters of teachers responded to this supplementary part. Almost a quarter of respondents stress that teachers are key players in revitalising and maintaining Irish (24.2%) but three main issues in implementing this role arise, as had with Group 1, and are listed below. Significantly more teachers in at the end of their programme mention the blame that they perceive to be placed on teachers for low standards of Irish ($X^2$ (2, N= 166) =8.363, p ≤.05).

Society has unrealistic expectations of teachers

(32.0% Group 1; 45.1% Group 2)

More support is needed for teachers in in exercising their role in relation to Irish

(29.4% Group 1; 26.4% Group 2)

*Teachers are often blamed for low standards of Irish in the general public

(4.0% Group 1; 18.7% Group 2)

Teachers feel that ideally parents should have a role in passing on Irish to their children and in working in tandem with the class teacher, but that in reality this support does not always exist. Local organisations that promote aspects of Irish traditional culture include The Gaelic Athletic Association and *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, a group that promotes traditional music. Almost half of teachers in the INTO study on teachers' attitudes in 1985 report an awareness of local Irish-language organisations but even in the present day while they may have developed some links with schools, teachers still feel that their role could be strengthened to include the teaching of some games, and musical instruments or singing through Irish.

Being proficient in the target language and providing rich and accurate language input is a key part of a teacher's classroom responsibility. There is a high-level stability across both groups relating to the views that teachers hold in relation to the importance of language proficiency. As shown in Table 3 below, teachers at the beginning and end of initial teacher education overwhelmingly support the notion that teacher proficiency in Irish is a key requirement for the primary teacher's work. The vast majority, both at the beginning and end, feel that is 'very important' or 'important' for teachers to improve their own Irish during initial teacher education (92.0% and 93.4% respectively) and agree that the advice to use Irish informally throughout the school day is 'very reasonable' or 'reasonable' (97.3% at the beginning and 100% at the end). When it comes to views about teaching another subject through Irish, over half of teachers in Group 1 and 2 feel that this is 'very reasonable' or 'reasonable' (57.3% and 57.1% respectively).

There is a statistically significant change however, as indicated by the asterisk in Table 3 below, in relation to expectation that Irish should be taught primarily through Irish (93.2% at the beginning compared to 57.1% at the end) ($X^2$ (2, N= 165) = 27.21, p $\leq$.05).

Table 3

*Percentage of Teachers at the Beginning and End of Initial Teacher Education Agreeing with Statements Regarding Teacher Proficiency*

| Questionnaire Items | Beginning of programme Group 1 n =75 | End of programme Group 2 n = 91 |
|---|---|---|
| 11. It is very important or important for pre-service teachers to improve their own Irish. | 92.0 | 93.4 |
| *12. I feel that the expectation to teach Irish primarily through Irish is very reasonable or reasonable. | 93.2 | 57.1 |
| 13. I feel that the advice to use Irish informally outside of Irish lessons is very reasonable or reasonable. | 97.3 | 100 |
| 14. I feel the advice that the teacher should make an effort to teach other subjects through Irish from time to time is very reasonable or reasonable. | 57.3 | 57.1 |

*Q12: $X^2$ (2, N= 165) = 27.21, p $\leq$.05

89.0% of Group 2 elaborated on their answer in the supplementary open-ended part and reported that while teachers are generally still in favour of teaching Irish primarily through Irish, they raise a number of issues in relation to implementing this effectively. Teachers draw on their experiences on school placements and as learners of Irish in lectures which are usually conducted for the most part through Irish. Significantly more teachers at the end suggest that there is a need for a judicious use of English in the teaching of Irish ($X^2$ (2, N= 166) =27.09, p $\leq$.05) and that there is a risk that children might disengage from the lesson if it is taught primarily through Irish ($X^2$ (2, N= 166) =17.974, p $\leq$.05):

Teaching primarily through Irish is the ideal approach

(51.0% Group 1; 56.0% Group 2)

*There is a need for a judicious use of English while teaching Irish

(1.0%; Group 1; 33.0% Group 2)

*Children might not understand and as a result might disengage from lesson

(1.0% Group 1; 24.2% Group 2)

Teachers at the end of initial teacher education also mention the following three factors:

Children's may have limited experience of immersion practices (15.4%)

Teachers are anxious about their ability to teach completely through Irish (5.5%)

Total immersion may not be beneficial for EAL and SEN children, and some class levels (2.2%)

The extent to which the mother tongue can be used in teaching a target language is raised in other international studies of language teachers (Liao, 2006; Wong, 2010). Data from the INTO (1985) survey show that a significant number of teachers reported challenges in teaching totally through Irish and many reported teaching partially through Irish. This has also been noted in more recent evaluations conducted by the Department of Education and Skills as a weakness in the teaching of Irish (DES, 2013). Teachers report challenges in nurturing positive attitudes to the language which is in keeping with other studies that show that children can have negative attitudes to the experience of learning Irish in school (Devine, 2003). Teachers are aware of their important role in creating a rich language environment for learners and therefore their wish to use as much Irish as possible and seek guidance on the role that English may play is understandable.

An examination of views of both groups at the beginning and end of initial teacher education reveals that many positive traits such as a positive attitude to the language and a willingness to use Irish outside of the Irish lesson are stable. However, as they advance through initial teacher education, they become more aware of the responsibility that is placed on them in revitalising Irish. They also become more cognisant of the demands placed on them in terms of teacher proficiency and providing an Irish-speaking environment for children.

### Language Proficiency and Experiences of Teaching Irish

Many of the expected roles of the teacher of Irish are predicated on the teacher having high proficiency in Irish e.g. teaching primarily through the medium of Irish, using informal Irish outside of the Irish lesson and teaching other subjects through Irish (CLIL) (NCCA, 1999a). This research sought to explore whether teachers with a higher self reported competence in the language have a different experience of teaching Irish.

A positive feature of BEd programmes is that they attract candidates with a high level of language proficiency and positive attitude to the language. Despite the above average competence reported by pre-service teachers, there are still serious concerns about teacher language proficiency and its impact on teachers' ability to teach Irish effectively (DES, 2013; Ó Duibhir, 2018). This is understandable to an extent when it is taken into account that Irish is a minority language and that both teachers and children are usually second or additional language speakers. In this study, correlation tests were administered to explore the influence that self-reported high ability in Irish has on teachers' confidence in engaging with aspects of their role. This data are supplemented with qualitative data from interviews with a third of Group 2 during their final year where they were spending significant periods in the classroom and still attending college lectures.

As is clear in Table 4 below, for teachers at the beginning of their programme, self-reported high proficiency is positively correlated with a view that it is reasonable to expect teachers to teach other subjects through Irish (r = .358) and an expectation that the teacher will derive great satisfaction from teaching Irish (r = .432). Significant correlations exist for high proficiency teachers at the end of their programme in relation to these two statements also. High proficiency amongst teachers at the end of their programme is also positively correlated with a view that it is important for teachers to improve their own Irish (r = .265) and that children in their class will have a lot of interest in Irish (r = .212). This is probably linked to the greater amount of experience that they have in teaching and their awareness of how central proficiency is to the teaching of Irish. Teachers at this stage also think that children will have more interest and higher proficiency in Irish. It is likely that this is due to the fact that most undertake school placement in an Irish-medium school, and as seen in the open-ended responses, teachers do not report difficulty in motivating children or nurturing positive attitudes to Irish in these settings. It should also be noted that reported correlations are relatively weak which shows that high proficiency in Irish plays some role in the formation and evolution of views, but that it may not play as large a role as experiences in the classroom.

High proficiency in Irish, for teachers at the beginning and end of teacher education, does not correlate with their views on the importance of Irish in the curriculum, or with their views on whether or not teachers should take on a greater responsibility in relation to the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish. This does not mean that teachers with higher proficiency in Irish are

necessarily negative about any of these issues but rather that positive views are widespread across the entire teacher cohort, and possibly linked to teachers' identity rather than being solely related to proficiency in Irish.

Table 4

*Correlations Between Role Perceptions and Teachers with High Oral Proficiency in Irish*

| Beginning of Programme | Correlation | End of Programme | Correlation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14. It is reasonable to expect teachers to teach other subjects from time to time through Irish. | $(r = .358)$ | 11. It is important for teachers to improve their own Irish | $(r = .265)$ |
| 17. I expect to derive great satisfaction from teaching Irish | $(r = .432)$ | 14. It is reasonable to expect teachers to teach other subjects from time to time through Irish. | $(r = .296)$ |
| | | 17. I expect to derive great satisfaction from teaching Irish | $(r = .235)$ |
| | | 18. The children in my class will have a high level of interest in Irish | $(r = .212)$ |

Taking account of all of these statistically significant correlations, it can be summarised that a higher level of proficiency influences, in a variety of ways, the views of teachers during initial teacher education. These teachers are more positive about teaching Irish, they associate greater satisfaction with teaching Irish, and they are more willing in principle to teach other subjects through Irish. High proficiency, therefore, can give rise to an increased confidence in teaching during initial teacher education. Correlations for most items are stronger at the beginning, showing that by the end of initial teacher education, there are other factors influencing teacher views.

Though these findings in relation to higher proficiency and increased confidence seem intuitive, in looking at the qualitative data derived from inteviews with a subgroup of teachers

during their final year (Group 2), it is clear that increased confidence does not always translate to actual implementation of these teaching methodologies (for a full discussion see Dunne, 2015). Teachers reporting high proficiency are no more likely to have actually implemented CLIL practices or to use informal Irish in a communicative way. Indeed most of the samples of informal Irish employed relate to the teacher using the imperative to give general instructions. Teachers can become disillusioned about the importance that schools place on high competence in Irish. The original belief that they reported during initial teacher education that high proficiency in Irish would be of benefit in getting a job is now challenged by teachers working in English-medium schools. Very few report that proficiency in Irish was mentioned in the job criteria or addressed in the interview. Indeed many refer to the 'tokenistic' Irish question they were asked in the interview. In the words of one teacher "*I found myself going into the interview and learning off an Irish question.*"

Teachers with higher proficiency are not immune to the challenges in teaching Irish that are reported by the rest of the group. They too report challenges in teaching completely through Irish in English-medium schools, and in nurturing positive attitudes to Irish amongst children. Teachers with high proficiency who chose to work in Irish-medium schools did not report these same challenges, although they are cognisant of the limited resources available for Irish-medium schools compared to English-medium schools. This points to the need for teachers to be supported in their day-to-day work in promoting Irish, particularly in English-medium schools, which is for the vast majority of pupils the environment in which they learn Irish. The relative isolation of this role has been highlighted before (Harris et al., 2006), and this finding adds urgency to this need for support.

On the one hand, these findings from the questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of initial teacher education, combined with the data reported in the interviews with a subgroup in their final year of their programme and when they have significant experience in the classroom, show that the initial enthusiasm and confidence associated with higher proficiency is not fully harnessed and does not automatically lead to greater use of Irish outside of the Irish lesson proper. On the other hand it suggests that teacher language proficiency, though important, is not the only factor in creating an environment in which children can experience and improve their language skills. Teachers note a particular challenge in nurturing positive attitudes. The focus on the teacher as the main language input reflects theories of cognitive psychology that

influenced the early design of immersion education programmes. Insights from sociocultural perspectives, however, point to the role that peer learning has on language development and so the focus should perhaps be shifted from a description of language proficiency to the pedagogical and content knowledge that a teacher has, and the subsequent strategies they employ to scaffold learning.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, pre-service teachers of Irish show some idiosyncratic ways of thinking even at the very earliest stages of initial teacher education given their above average competence and investment in learning Irish. Many attitudes and role perceptions are shared by student teachers at the beginning and at the end of teacher education. This is important because the attitudes and role perceptions with which they enter initial teacher education are mostly conducive to teaching Irish effectively and to promoting Irish through their role as teachers, and are linked to confidence in the language. Despite claims that views are immutable, a small number of role perceptions are reported to change throughout initial teacher education following teachers' classroom experience. Though the number of changes is small, these can make substantial changes in the way a teacher will engage in her role. Teachers are key players in the promotion of Irish and their awareness of this role and their relative isolation in doing so becomes more apparent as they move through their educational programme. Some changes point to a need for more guidance e.g. in relation to the potential role that English has in the teaching of Irish and how teachers can be supported by other members in the community in promoting Irish.

Many concerns over teacher proficiency have been noted by the Department of Education and Skills (2013) and teachers report challenges in teaching primarily through Irish. Self-rated high oral proficiency in Irish is an advantage in that it leads to increased confidence in taking on aspects of their future role, particularly at the beginning of initial teacher education, but it does not mean that these teachers are any less vulnerable to the challenges of nurturing positive attitudes or in creating an Irish-speaking environment. It would seem that support around nurturing positive attitudes to Irish, and in sharing responsibility for the promotion of Irish amongst other members of the community, is needed for all teachers regardless of their own positive attitude and competence.

The minority status of Irish leads to a heightened responsibility on teachers in promoting the language, and they are aware that the language is not usually reinforced outside the school gates. This study highlights their commitment to and awareness of this important role, even at the very early stages of their career.

### Notes on the Contributor

Claire M. Dunne is a lecturer in the Irish language and education in Marino Institute of Education, an associated college of Trinity College Dublin.

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