

Preface

When I reached the age of four and it was time for me to start school, my parents discovered to their dismay that places in the local school were oversubscribed and there was no room for me. Fortunately, there were places available in an all-Irish school close by and I attended that school for just three years before transferring to an English-medium school. This proved to be a formative experience for me that gave me not only an excellent basic competence in Irish but also an interest in and enthusiasm for the language that I have carried throughout my personal and professional life.

Having gained a qualification as a primary school teacher and taught for a number of years in a school where Irish was a core subject, I got the opportunity in 1985 to teach in a newly established all-Irish school. *Scoil Chaitlín Maude* was established as part of a relatively new vibrant movement where parents were leading the demand for education through the medium of Irish. During 14 exciting years as a teacher and principal I faced many challenges with excellent colleagues in meeting the educational needs of the pupils. There was a dearth of policies, guidelines, materials and resources that we now take for granted to guide us and aid us in our work in immersion education. As teachers, we created all of these things incrementally, drawing encouragement from colleagues in other all-Irish schools. It would be fair to say that our pedagogy was very much practice driven rather than research driven.

The all-Irish school movement has continued to grow from strength to strength since that time. Part of the strengthening of the sector has been the greater body of research that now informs practice. One of the frustrations for me and my colleagues as teachers was the non-target-like output of our pupils' Irish despite up to 6000 hours contact with the language in primary school. This output manifested itself in particular in deviations in terms of sentence structure and idiomatic phrases. We tried many strategies to address these issues, such as focus on form lessons, corrective feedback and incentives. Our interventions appeared to have only limited success. Among my motivations in subsequently becoming a teacher educator was the desire to better prepare teachers for teaching through the medium of Irish and to provide a greater evidence base for this work. If teaching is to be successful it should align as far as possible

with the way that children learn. One of the aims of this volume is to help immersion educators to gain a greater understanding of how young immersion learners learn and acquire the target language taking account of in-class and out-of-class factors.

As a parent in an Irish-speaking home, I was grateful for the support we received from the all-Irish schools that my children attended in enriching their language acquisition. I observed that many of their friends who visited our home were happy to converse in Irish with me but not with one another. As my children have left school and grown into adulthood, the only domain in which they generally have opportunities to speak Irish is at home. Despite the fact that many of their friends received all their primary and post-primary education through Irish, they seldom communicate with one another through Irish. It appears that the speaking of Irish has not been normalised as their language of socialisation.

Scoil Chaitlín Maude has reached the stage in its development where former pupils now send their children as pupils. Very few of these former pupils speak Irish as their main language in conversations with their children at home. Nonetheless, they are content for their children to receive an Irish-medium education which will ensure that the children will have at least a basic or adequate ability to speak Irish.

These observations have prompted me to ask the following questions: Are all-Irish schools successful in educating pupils to become competent Irish speakers? If so, how might this language competence be converted to active bilingualism in the wider community beyond the school gates? There seems to be an assumption in the discourse on language revitalisation in Ireland that if only the teachers had better competency in Irish and if the schools could teach Irish more effectively, we would somehow become a bilingual society. Those of us who work in the immersion sector realise that language planning is much more complicated than that. Success in converting minority language competence acquired in an education context to societal use has been very limited, particularly in the absence of a critical mass of speakers.

The personal experiences and professional challenges outlined here, prompted me to explore these questions and to undertake the studies reported in this volume. I hope that this body of research will prompt debate and discourse, and inform the future direction of immersion education in Ireland and internationally.

As the studies in this volume were conducted over a number of years, I owe a debt of gratitude to many people. It would not have been possible to conduct the research without the cooperation and participation of pupils, teachers and parents in many Irish-medium schools throughout Ireland who gave generously of their time. I am deeply grateful to them for all I learned from them. John Harris, TCD, was my doctoral supervisor and I benefited enormously from his expert knowledge, research experience

and ongoing guidance and encouragement in carrying out much of the research presented here. Much of the early research presented in this volume was inspired by the work of Merrill Swain, Sharon Lapkin and Jim Cummins of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I greatly appreciate the advice and support that I received from Merrill, Sharon, Jim, the Toronto District School Board and the Ottawa Carleton District School Board in conducting interviews with teachers in Toronto and Ottawa. I would also like to thank the teachers for giving so generously of their time and insights. The time spent in Ontario would not have been possible without the accommodation provided by John O'Dwyer.

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