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Project Objectives: A Summary

Learners of Irish in schools in Ireland and around the world confront a challenging spelling system that differs significantly from the spelling system of English, familiar to most learners of Irish. Children's achievement in Irish reading and their leisure reading rates in Irish are poor for the majority of pupils (Dept. of Education & Skills, 2013). This project has developed a clearer understanding of the problems regarding the teaching of Irish reading, and formulated an analysis of the Irish writing system (its orthography) that offers a foundation for more effective teaching of Irish reading in the future.

The Work of the Project

This collaboration between Marie Curie International Incoming Fellow, Prof Nancy Stenson, and Scientist-in-Charge, Dr Tina Hickey has contributed significantly to understanding issues in the following areas:

Needs Assessment

Practitioner views of the effectiveness of current methods of teaching Irish reading were elicited, and the shifts in Irish teaching which appear to have marginalised the teaching of Irish literacy in many mainstream classrooms. Interviews were conducted with primary teachers and other experts (teacher educators, secondary teachers and Irish experts at third level) to explore teachers' and experts' experience of, and approach to, teaching Irish and Irish reading in particular, to elicit views on the challenges of teaching Irish reading and their analysis of what would help. Interviews also explored interviewees' explicit knowledge of how Irish orthography works and the extent to which they teach Irish spelling and engage in comparison with English spelling. The data from these interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, and presentations based on them were delivered at academic conferences (NAACLT, 2013, RAI, 2014).

Orthographic Analysis of Irish Regularity and Dialect Comparison

A detailed analysis of Irish orthography was undertaken, based on the 1000 most frequent words in a corpus of Irish books for children. The rules underlying the letter-sound correspondences in these words were extracted and formalized, allowing assessment of the regularity of the spellings of these words in the three Irish dialects. This analysis allows a linguistically-based detailed formulation of how Irish orthography works, a pre-requisite for future pedagogical developments. This formed the basis of presentations for three international conferences (UKLA 2014, NAACLT 2014 and ILA 2015) and publications under review.

Review and Evaluation of existing materials

Materials currently used in Irish primary schools and with adult learners were examined with reference to how they present and explain Irish spelling. This informed a publication for an international edited book on the teaching of Irish (in press, 2015) and an article currently in preparation for an international journal.

Eyetracking Study

An eye-tracking study was designed using a range of texts in Irish, from simple to advanced, and using a detailed language background form to categorise reading proficiency levels among the bilingual participants with moderate to advanced proficiency in Irish. A rich dataset of eyetracking behaviour by these adult participants reading Irish texts of different levels of difficulty has been collected and is currently being analyzed as the basis for publication in an international journal.

Main Results: An Overview

The main results of this project include:

- Analysis of teachers' perceptions of the challenges of teaching Irish reading, and their approach to it;
- Linguistic analysis of Irish spelling patterns in the most frequent words in children's books in Irish
- Based on this analysis of the rules of Irish orthography, a Manual for pre- and in-service teachers and adult learners which aims to address the needs identified by teachers and experts.

The detailed analysis of Irish orthography undertaken here challenges prevailing assumptions that Irish spelling is easier than English. The results do show that Irish spelling is more consistent than English, in early vocabulary at least, but it was also found to require a large number of complex rules that are not easily extracted. This is interpreted as support for the explicit teaching of decoding rules, to help learners to acquire more effectively the recognition of patterns in sound-spelling relations needed for fluent Irish reading. However, teacher interview data indicate low awareness of the value of such systematic instruction, or of how to provide it. The orthographic analysis of Irish shows the extensive differences in spelling conventions

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between Irish and English, the language spoken by most learners of Irish, and highlights the fact that, given the extent of these differences, transfer of English spelling rules to Irish cannot be viewed as leading always to positive transfer. The risk of negative transfer leading to fossilized errors could be reduced if teachers were offered a clearer exposition of Irish-specific spelling rules to support the teaching of decoding skills in Irish reading. The project has generated conference presentations to teacher groups, refereed articles in international publications, and input to curriculum revision arguing for a different approach to Irish reading instruction both for child learners (in schools in Ireland), and adult learners abroad (e.g. in the UK and U.S.), based on the study's fine-grained analysis of Irish spelling rules and the needs analysis interviews which point to the value of offering teachers explicit training in how the Irish orthographic system works and the benefits of establishing stronger foundations in Irish literacy among learners. The results show that a clear case can be made for teaching Irish reading more systematically from the outset, with materials to support such an approach. Using the findings of the study, a manual for teachers and students has been developed to explain features of Irish orthography with the aim of supporting on-going revision of pedagogical approaches to Irish reading instruction to address more effectively the challenges it poses.

Socioeconomic Impact and Wider Societal Implications

This project argues that the explicit teaching of language-specific decoding skills is more beneficial than reliance on transfer from another very different orthography, and that good foundational literacy in a second language (L2) should not be regarded as an “optional extra” but rather as a vital component in L2 learning, serving as the base on which to build L2 vocabulary and syntactic skills. In presentations and publications, the researchers have discussed the project's findings, which accord with international cross-linguistic research, that more systematic teaching of Irish decoding skills would build reading fluency more effectively, and that L2 literacy is even more important for minority languages to which children have low levels of exposure outside of the classroom, offering vital input and opportunities for enhancing motivation. Thus, preparation and provision for the development of strong lower-level *skills* in reading Irish as an L2 are necessary first steps towards developing older readers' *'will to read'* and use that language more. The potential impacts of this project can be seen as relating to the following three spheres:

Educational Sphere

The analysis relates directly to the expressed needs of *teachers, teacher educators and other third-level academics* for training and support in order to develop teachers' and students' knowledge base and understanding of Irish orthography. Presentations and publications from the project raise awareness of the need for more explicit training for students in how Irish orthography differs from English, as a basis on which to build more effectively the emergent biliteracy of primary school pupils in Ireland and adult learners abroad. The drafted *Manual for Teachers and Learners* seeks to address the need for explicit training in teacher education to develop a better understanding of Irish orthography, so that teachers are equipped to teach an analytic decoding approach more effectively. At third level, the research raised awareness of the need to assess the Irish literacy levels of students and consider ways of teaching and testing such literacy.

Policy

The findings are relevant to the ongoing review of national policy regarding Irish teaching at first, second and third level, where the target groups include policy makers, curriculum designers and those involved in research on learning Irish as L2. The researchers were invited to offer comments on the new *Draft Integrated Curriculum* in mid-2014, allowing research findings to be communicated rapidly and directly to key policy makers. Possible means of broadening the reach of the dissemination of project findings to teachers and third-level students of Irish are currently being explored with regard to discussions about trial of the Manual with different student groups at third-level.

Civil Society

Here the target groups include parents of children attending schools in Ireland, and adult learners of Irish in Ireland and abroad. Prof. Stenson has extensive experience of teaching Irish to adult learners, and shared her expertise with staff and students in UCD in both formal and informal contexts, with the help of the *Oifigeach Gaeilge*, and also with other academic institutions in Ireland and internationally. Dr. Hickey brought the findings of the study to bear in her university teaching and supervision and in outreach to parents such as responding to queries about their children's problems with Irish literacy, and linking these findings into related research, such as the eyetracking study of proficient Irish readers and other research conducted by doctoral students on promoting parental involvement in Irish-medium education, and supporting Irish acquisition as first and second language.