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RESEARCH BRIEFING

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DEVELOPING LINGUISTIC ACCURACY IN IRISH-MEDIUM PRIMARY SCHOOLS

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ Children become highly competent communicators, who use the language fluently and willingly.
- ◆ Acquisition of most major aspects of Irish grammar takes place effectively through use of Irish in the classroom, without needing specific instruction in grammar.
- ◆ There is little evidence of interference from English in most major grammatical structures.
- ◆ Many of the early errors children make subsequently disappear without specific work.
- ◆ However, there is a small number of areas where children make errors in relation to the target language, and which persist for a considerable period.
- ◆ Although most teachers are not native speakers of Irish, there is no evidence that any of the children's errors arise because of errors in teacher input. Rather the errors arise as part of the language development process itself.

1. BACKGROUND

Children in Irish-medium schools come in the very great majority from monolingual English-speaking homes. Their first significant exposure to Irish is on entering nursery education, and, since Irish is not widely used in the community, for most, the majority of their exposure to Irish takes place in the classroom setting. Teaching in these nurseries and schools is through the medium of Irish. Pupils acquire Irish through being exposed to everyday use of the language in the classroom, rather than through explicit instruction. They generally become very competent and fluent Irish speakers, and experience little difficulty with spontaneously acquiring most aspects of the language. However, some areas of the language continue to present difficulties for these children, whose speech remains non-native-like in a few areas for some time during the course of their development. The aim of this study was to identify the areas of difficulty, to explore why these particular areas cause problems, and consider how progress in these aspects of the language might be promoted.

A particular area of concern identified by teachers is the level of linguistic accuracy that should be expected at various stages, and the strategies that might be adopted in relation to pupils' linguistic errors. Recent work in linguistics and language acquisition theory suggests that certain types of error are to be expected in language acquisition and indeed are a productive part of the process (see for example Marcus et al 1992, Wexler 1994); correcting these errors will either be ineffective or in some cases hinder the natural acquisition process. Moreover, constant correction of errors is liable to discourage fluency. On the other hand, it is clear that, in sequential bilingualism, certain errors will fossilize if not attended to at the appropriate time, either by strong positive evidence of the corresponding correct form, or by negative feedback.

However, since there have been few detailed linguistic studies of the acquisition of Irish as a second language in an immersion setting (Owens 1992, while detailed, is a study by a parent of a single child), it has until now been unclear in precisely which aspects of language children make errors, and whether and if so when any of those errors should cause concern.

Immersion education occurs in many other areas apart from Northern Ireland, and something can be learned from experience in other areas, but there are no situations which exactly parallel that in Northern Ireland. Children in Irish-medium schools in Belfast are in a different situation from those for example in Welsh-medium education in Wales, where, even in predominantly English-speaking areas, there is usually at least a small number of pupils in each class who are first-

language Welsh speakers (Baker 1993, Ball & Henry 1996). Almost all children attending Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland are from English-speaking homes; these children experience early immersion education in the Irish language. A small number of children attending Irish-medium schools are from bilingual homes in which one parent is Irish-speaking or, more infrequently, from totally Irish-speaking homes. Immersion education in Northern Ireland also bears a more distant resemblance to the situation in French immersion education in English-speaking areas of Canada, where however the immersion language is a majority language of another area rather than a minority one. Thus, while something can be learned from strategies in other immersion systems, it is important to bear in mind the particular characteristics of each setting. The situation in Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland perhaps resembles most closely the situation in the Diwan (Breton-medium) schools in parts of Brittany (Favereau 1996, Stephens 1996) where almost all the pupils are from French-speaking homes, but in this area also, research is just beginning to be undertaken.

2. METHODOLOGY

It was necessary to establish a set of data covering the Irish used by pupils learning the language in an immersion setting, since only a very small amount of data was already available. The initial focus was on oral language, which, being less subject to conscious monitoring, is more representative of the child's internalised grammar.

The research was undertaken in an established Irish-medium school. After initial monitoring and sampling of language throughout the school, the P3, P4 and P5 age groups were selected for intensive study. P3 is the earliest stage in this particular school at which children are interacting more or less exclusively in Irish; at earlier ages, although the teachers use only Irish, the pupils often or mainly use English in response. (This is similar to the situation in a number of other bilingual school settings, particularly those in Canada (Canadian Education Association 1992) and the strategy of allowing the use of the target language to develop naturally rather than being forced appears to be an effective one).

P5 was judged by teachers to be the stage at which language use begins to fossilize. Eighteen children were selected, six from each group. The children selected were all from English-speaking homes and had no older siblings in Irish-medium education. Teachers were asked to select children whose language was representative of the level of the class as a whole.

The aim was to gain a representative sample of spontaneous speech, covering as wide a range as possible of the children's competence, rather than to test specific

structures. Before recording, the researcher spent some time in each class, so that the children were accustomed to talking to him. The children were then interviewed in groups of two by the researcher and their language was recorded. The younger children were offered lego to play with, and the older children given paper and drawing materials, in order to produce a relaxed communicative atmosphere rather than a test situation. Each recording lasted approximately 45 minutes. To give children who might have been less responsive during the first set of recordings a chance to speak, further recordings were done with each child lasting 15 minutes.

The tapes were transcribed using the CED format of CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) (Macwhinney & Snow 1990), and were analysed using the associated CHAT child language analysis programmes and by hand to establish which areas were and were not subject to difficulty. All errors in relation to the target language were identified, classified and coded. In addition, an English tier was added, to make the files accessible to those without a high level of Irish, for example, researchers on language acquisition and immersion education in other areas. The files will be contributed to the CHILDES database and will be a valuable resource for further research in this area.

3. FINDINGS

An important point to stress is that the children at all ages from P3 onwards have a very high level of communicative skill; they rarely have problems getting a point across, and they use Irish fluently and willingly. Moreover, they have command of a wide range of vocabulary and structures, which increases rapidly as they progress through school. The communicative approach used is thus producing very fluent and competent Irish speakers, who are willing and able to use the language in everyday interaction.

However, while there are many areas of Irish grammar where children experience no difficulties at all, there is a small number of areas where they do experience problems. It is important to note that errors in production are not by themselves a cause for concern; they are a natural part of the acquisition process, and in some cases an integral part of it. However, there appear to be a few aspects where children's difficulties are not a transient part of their grammatical development, but rather fossilize as an ongoing part of their internal grammars. These errors do not simply arise, as might a priori have been expected, in those areas where the grammar of Irish is different from the children's first language, English. Rather, they target a few very specific areas of the grammar.

It is important to emphasise here that for successful acquisition to occur in an immersion setting, overt correction of errors must not dominate the classroom; as

Snow (1990) and Baker (1996) note, successful immersion programmes, such as those in Canada, are highly tolerant of errors in pupils' language and focus on communicative skill rather than grammatical correctness in the early stages, as it is this which allows naturalistic language acquisition to occur. What distinguishes immersion programmes from traditional classroom-taught second language acquisition is that becoming a successful communicator in the second language is the norm, achieved by almost all the children, whereas in taught second language acquisition, there are much greater differences in levels of performance between pupils.

It is also important to note that expectations of accuracy should not be set too high in the early stages. Studies of French immersion education in Canada (for example, Genessee 1983, Carey 1991) have shown that, by around the end of the primary stage, children are native-like in their comprehension of the target language, French, but not yet native-like in their production. Moreover, even at more advanced stages, grammatical errors occur (Hammerly 1988, Selinker, Swain & Dumas 1975).

Since constant correction of errors is not desirable, and may impede effective language development, it is necessary to identify areas where long-term errors occur and to develop strategies in relation to these which give pupils suitable input to enable them to overcome their problems, without disrupting natural communication and acquisition processes.

Another important issue which arises is the extent to which change is a natural product of language revival. That is, one would not expect, in the context of revival of a language in an area not contiguous with one which has a continuous transmission tradition, to replicate exactly the form of language spoken in the 'target language' area. The phenomenon of subtle language change in the context of revival has been noted in other areas. For example, Davalan (1999) notes that there are a number of changes in Breton which are not only common in the language of new Breton speakers, but are even influencing the language of native speakers. However, there is a distinction to be made between natural evolution and change in a language, and the errors of early learners.

The teachers who provide the input for the children are speakers who have themselves learned Irish as a second language, but have an almost native-like level of competence. While second language speakers, no matter how competent, generally have usage which is non-native-like at least in very subtle ways, there is no evidence in teacher input of the error-types found in the language of the pupils; they are thus a product of the operation of the learning process on the input data, rather than of errors in the input data itself.

3.1 AREAS WHERE NO PROBLEMS ARISE

This study focuses on error patterns, but it should be noted that errors are very much the exception rather than the rule - the pupils are in general highly competent language users who have few problems in spontaneously acquiring most aspects of the language.

For example, one striking fact is that the children have no difficulty in acquiring the Verb-Subject word order found in Irish. Irish differs from English in that the verb precedes the subject, rather than following it, in simple sentences¹. There is no evidence whatever in the data of sentences with English-like subject-verb order; in all multi-word utterances the children use the appropriate basic word order.

- (1) Fuair mise an clog²
Got me the clock
'I got the clock'
- (2) Thit gach rud
Fell every thing
'Everything fell'
- (3) Tá an t-urlár fuar
Be the floor cold
'The floor is cold'
- (4) Fuair mise an scór is airde sa rang
Got me the score highest in class
'I got the highest score in the class'
- (5) Bhí mise ag gáire
Was me at laughing
'I was laughing'

1 This is generally analysed in terms of linguistic theory as the movement of the verb from the verb phrase to a higher projection, with the subject appearing in the specifier position of a lower projection (see for example McCloskey 1996) If acquisition is seen as the setting of parameters, then the children are clearly capable of resetting the parameters which they had acquired in respect of their first language.

2 Examples are given in the following form. The first line is the pupil's example; the second is a word-for-word translation into English, and the third a translation into English. In some cases where there is an error in the pupil form, a fourth line gives the correct version.

It should be noted that knowledge of verb position does not arise because of correction of earlier errors in relation to this, or through any explicit teaching; rather, it develops naturally through the children's interaction with naturally occurring language data in the classroom.

The same applies to Noun-Adjective order. Irish differs from English in that the adjective generally follows the noun, rather than preceding it. With a very few exceptions, children used the correct Noun-Adjective order even though this is different from English:

- (6) Teach beag
House little
'A little house'

- (7) Déanaim rudaí difriúla
Do (1sg) things different
'I do different things'

Thus the children are able to acquire some major aspects of Irish grammar which differ from their first language, English, without any problems.

3.2 AREAS WHERE DIFFICULTIES ARISE

There are however some areas where errors do occur; some of these are part of the natural developmental process and disappear without specific work; a small number however fossilize in the children's usage.

3.2.1 Developmental errors

A number of errors which occur in the younger age groups reduce spontaneously during acquisition without requiring specific work. These include for example the use of English words or phrases in Irish sentences, and treating irregular verbs as if they were regular.

3.2.1.1 USE OF ENGLISH WORDS IN IRISH SENTENCES

Children make productive use of English words, sometimes with Irish morphology, in Irish sentences. This is prevalent in P3 children but declines; it appears to be mainly a case of using English words where the child does not yet know the Irish word or cannot retrieve it from the mental lexicon easily in conversation.

- (8) Tá mise ag fáil clogs fá choinne mo chéad chomaoineach
 Be me at getting clogs for my first communion
 'I am getting clogs for my first communion'
 (target version: Tá mise ag fáil paitíní fá choinne mo chéad chomaoineach)
- (9) Started mise ag an scoil seo
 Started me (+emph) at this school
 'I started at this school'
- (10) Fix siad é
 Fix they it
 'They fixed it'
- (11) Ní pay faidh mise
 Not will pay me
 'I will not pay'

This is a very normal part of early naturalistic second language acquisition and is not a sign of any long-term problem. Where the learner either lacks knowledge of the word in the target language, or is insufficiently familiar with it to retrieve it from the mental lexicon easily in conversation, a word from the first language is substituted. This gradually declines as vocabulary knowledge increases.

3.2.1.2 OVERGENERALIZATION OF VERB ENDINGS

Overgeneralization of verb endings - that is, the use of regular rules where the verb is in fact irregular - is a positive part of the language acquisition process; it shows that the learner knows the regular rule and is not simply learning forms by rote; and, according to Marcus et al (1992), the development of the correct irregular form will emerge simply as a result of more exposure to the form. Some examples of overgeneralization in the data are given below.

- (12) Dulann tú mar sin
 Go you like that
 'You go'
 (correct form 'Téann tú mar sin')
- (13) Teachann an buitléir
 Comes the butler
 'The butler comes'
 (target form 'Tagann an buitléir')

3.2.2 Errors which fossilize

A small number of areas continue to present difficulty for the children, persisting even into the secondary school stage. The most salient of these are use of the copula, word order in non-finite clauses, and the incorporation of pronouns.

3.2.2.1 THE COPULA

Irish has two lexical items which cover the range of uses served by *be* in English, *tá* and *is*. A description is given below of the circumstances in which each is used. While sentences with *tá* exhibit the normal word order patterns of Irish, that is Verb-Subject-Complement, when *is* has an indefinite complement, it is followed by a construction which is unusual in Irish in that the predicate precedes the subject, and the subject is marked with accusative case.

- (14) Is dochtúir é
Is doctor him
'He is a doctor'

The children in this study failed to acquire the use of *is* in this construction, and substituted a structure with *tá* which is ungrammatical in the target language.

- (15) Tá sé dochtúir
Is he doctor
'He is a doctor'

The difference between *is* and *tá* has been claimed to be one between an individual level predicate (that is, an inherent property of an individual) and a stage level predicate (that is, a transient property). Now the use of *is*, apart from in fixed formulae, is not generally acquired by the children, who substitute *tá*. This is apparently not the case with first language learners; thus for example MacMathúna (1979) states that the subject he studied, Máirtín, acquired adult-like use of the copula at an early stage. The stage/individual distinction is coded in the copula in a number of languages (for example Spanish), and is clearly a distinction that very young children have no difficulty with; however, if they acquire a language which does not make this distinction overtly, they appear to lose the ability to acquire the distinction at an early stage. This would argue for deliberate introduction of copular structures early in the nursery school stage.

3.2.2.2 WORD ORDER IN INFINITIVAL CLAUSES

In Irish, the word order in infinitival clauses has the object in front of the verb, again an unusual order for the language.

- (16) Ba mhaith liom [an teach a thógáil]
Is good with me the house TRANS³ build
'I would like to build the house'
(example from Carnie 1995)

This aspect of syntax causes problems for the children in this study, who place the object consistently after the verb. The particle 'a' is sometimes included and sometimes omitted, but in neither case is the word order correct.

- (17) Ar mhaith leat a dhéanamh tarracóir?
Is good with you TRANS make tractor
'Would you like to make a tractor?'
(target form: Ar mhaith leat tarracóir a dhéanamh?)
- (18) Agus caithfidh tú fáil an rud sin
And have you get that thing
'And you have to get that thing'
(target form: Agus caithfidh tú an rud sin a fháil)
- (19) Caithfidh mise a súgradh Cliffhanger
Have me (+emph) TRANS play Cliffhanger
'I have to play Cliffhanger'
(target form: Caithfidh mise Cliffhanger a shúgradh)
- (20) Thig leis a dhéanamh gach rud
Is possible to him to do everything
'He can do everything'
(target form: Thig leis gach rud a dhéanamh)

Carnie (1995) argues that *a* is a marker of object agreement, which triggers movement of the object in front of the verb. Again, as with *is* we see an individual lexical item triggering a difference in structure, and this is something the children find difficult to acquire, whereas more general properties do not cause problems.

3 *The particle 'a' is glossed 'TRANS' for transitive, following Carnie 1995, since it occurs only where a direct object is present.*

These rather marked structures, which behave differently from other aspects of the language, do not appear to develop naturally in the immersion setting, but rather require additional work.

3.2.2.3 PRONOUNS AND PREPOSITIONS

In Irish nouns incorporate with prepositions, for example:

- (21) Le mé ---> Liam
- Le mise ---> Liamsa
- Le tú ---> Leat
- Le tusa ---> Leatsa

The children sometimes fail to use incorporation, instead using a preposition followed by a pronoun; this occurs particularly frequently with the emphatic forms of pronouns, which children generally use more frequently than would be expected in adult native speaker discourse.

- (22) An maith le tusa bláth?
Be good with you flower?
'Do you like flowers?'
(target form: An maith leatsa bláthanna?)
- (23) Ba mhaith le mise lego
Was good with me lego
'I liked lego'
(target form: Ba mhaith liomsa lego)
- (24) Tá mamaí agus daidí ag iad
Be mummy and daddy at them
'They have a mummy and daddy'
(target form: Tá mamaí agus daidí acu)

However, they sometimes do incorporate pronouns; this is particularly the case with weak pronouns in what may be fixed expressions.

- (25) Ní thig leat ...
Not can with you
'You cannot'
- (26) Ar mhaith leat ...?
Q good with you?
'Do you like ...?'

but also appears in productive contexts.

Some children use incorporation optionally, sometimes using the (correct) combined form and sometimes using the preposition and pronoun separately. However, some children appear to have developed a grammar where weak pronouns incorporate with prepositions, but emphatic ones do not:

- (27) le mé ---> liom
 BUT
 le mise ---> le mise (target liomsa)

This is a natural rule in terms of Universal Grammar; in many languages, weak pronouns behave differently from stressed ones; for example, in a number of languages weak pronouns undergo object shift whereas strong ones do not. Thus, the children have adopted a grammar which is very natural, but does not happen to be the one found in the target language.

A contributing factor to the problems with pronouns after prepositions may be the fact that the children use emphatic pronouns much more than would be usual in native speaker discourse. It is possible that in the classroom setting, the use of emphatic pronouns is higher than it would be in a first language acquisition setting.

4. PROMOTING ACCURACY

A study of the effectiveness of overt correction was undertaken with the P4 and P5 pupils. This proved to be effective in relation to the incorporation of pronouns with prepositions, particularly for those children who used incorporation optionally, but had no effect in relation to the use of the copula or word order in non-finite clauses. Note that with prepositions, the problem was that incorporation was optional in the children's grammars, not that they did not use the form.

In children's written work, there was evidence of correction in relation to the children's non-use of the copula from P3 onwards, and children sometimes used it in writing when following a model closely, but there was no evidence that this carried over into the children's grammars; this feature is clearly highly resistant to change. Although published data on first language acquisition of Irish is rather sparse, there is some evidence that this does not cause problems for young children acquiring Irish as a first language. Thus, MacMathúna (1979) claims that the subject he studied, Máirtín, showed no difficulty in acquiring the copula. However, study of input at the nursery and early primary stage showed that there was little use of copular structures. The use of games and songs which use the

copula, incorporating structures such as 'She is a doctor', 'He is a teacher', and the use of the copula, rather than 'sin' (that is) to name objects, might enable productive use of the copula to be established at this early stage. This also argues for an early start to nursery schooling so that the early acquisition period is capitalised on.

For pupils who have not developed the copula at this stage, then clearly much focused input will be necessary. One useful type of input is in relation to teacher recasts of pupil errors. There is a tendency to give a recast which is as close as possible to the pupil form, and in relation to structures where the pupil uses *tá* instead of *is*, this leads to the use of the structure with *ina*, which, while grammatical, does not show the pupil the use of *is*. Thus, responding to pupil use of a sentence like (28) with a recast like (29):

(28) Tá sé múinteoir
Is he teacher
'He is a teacher'

(29) Tá sé ina mhúinteoir
Is he in-his teacher
'He is a teacher'

(29) is grammatical and means something like 'He has become a teacher; he is a teacher at this stage'; it is grammatical, and has the advantage of providing a recast close to the pupil form, but does not give the pupil the opportunity to hear the more usual form with *is* directly contrasted with the (incorrect) *tá* form.

(30) Is múinteoir é
Is teacher him
'He is a teacher'

Henry & Tangney (in press) argue that the areas where pupils have difficulty are areas where the structure is unusual for the language concerned (thus, for example, the word order in copular structures is different from that in other sentences), and thus requires acquisition of a parameter setting which is marked. This only happens where there is considerable pressure from input data. This argues for the development of materials including frequent use of the copula, and its deliberate frequent use in the classroom. Songs, stories and games which incorporate this language could be developed; labelling the objects in the classroom, not merely as 'tábla' but as 'Is tábla é' (It is a table) may increase exposure to the copula. Similar focused input will be needed in relation to word order in infinitival clauses. An idea used effectively in some Scots Gaelic immersion schools is the 'structure theme week' where all classes focus on a particular

structure for a period, and this may be a way of ensuring that focused input is provided, and for which materials can be developed for use throughout the school.

It is to be emphasised that deliberately focusing input is not generally needed, but only necessary in the very few areas where errors fossilize. Henry & Tangney (in press) argue that in an immersion setting, processes of change already in progress in the language are accelerated, because marked aspects of the language are only acquired where the evidence in their favour in the language is overwhelming, and in some cases the immersion setting provides fewer opportunities to hear certain structures than would occur in first language acquisition. It is only in those areas that additional input is needed.

5. CONCLUSION

Immersion education in Irish is producing very capable and fluent speakers; the strategy of teaching in the language, rather than teaching the language, is successful, and most areas of the language develop without being taught explicitly. However, in a very small number of areas, children's speech remains non-native-like for an extended period. These aspects of the language, which appear to be those which are in some sense marked in Irish, do not develop naturally with the amount and type of input available in the immersion setting, and need specific focused input; only where a feature is already used optionally, however, does overt correction appear to help.

6. THE PROJECT

This study was undertaken by Alison Henry (University of Ulster), Áine Andrews (Gaelscoil na bhFál) and Pól Ó Cainín (University of Ulster). The Department of Education paid £15,000 (part-funding).

7. REPORT

The full report entitled "Developing Linguistic Accuracy in Irish-Medium Primary Schools" is available from the Department of Education, price £5⁴.

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

⁴ Each education establishment and library is entitled to one free copy.

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