‘I think they just think it’s going to go away at some stage’: Policy and Practice in Teaching English as an Additional Language in Irish Primary Schools

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Due to growth in immigration to the Republic of Ireland, the number of language minority students enrolling in primary schools has increased substantially over the last 10 years. The Irish context is a particularly interesting one in that until recently Ireland was a country of net emigration with limited experience of cultural diversity. An additional factor here is the Irish language, which makes the education system open to bilingualism and encouraging linguistic diversity. This study looks at how Ireland is responding to these changes in a case study of practice in teaching English as an additional language (EAL) to students in a city in western Ireland. A review of government policy initiatives in this area reveals that they seem to have been developed primarily in isolation from international models of best practice. Instead, the concern is with reacting to what is considered a temporary issue. Finally, the case study shows very inconsistent EAL provision for learners in schools and a general under-valuing of the subject and teachers involved in its delivery.

Keywords: education policy, language minority students, English as an additional language, primary education, Republic of Ireland

Introduction

Over the last decade, the Republic of Ireland, which traditionally saw itself as a country of emigrants, has now come to be redefined as a country of immigration. As a result, the issue of addressing the language and cultural needs of a new generation of immigrant children has become increasingly urgent in a way that was never foreseen. In this paper we first of all explore what is particular and interesting about the Irish case before going on to evaluate policy and compare practice in the education of children learning English as a second or additional language in Irish schools. A variety of models from other countries are presented and compared with current Irish policy. Finally, the results of interviews with a number of teachers directly involved in implementing this policy are presented and discussed.

Before proceeding, it is first of all necessary to address the issue of terminology. Researchers and educators employ a variety of descriptors to refer to students who are not fluent speakers of the dominant or official language, or the language of educational instruction. While all these terms have advantages and disadvantages, three are used in this paper. First, the term ‘language minority’ describes students who use a language other than English at home, though this term does not indicate English language ability (Davidson, 2003). Second, the
term ‘English as an additional language’ (EAL) student is employed most often and includes students at all proficiency levels. Finally, ‘non-English-speaking non-national’ student, a problematic term that lacks accuracy and focuses on students’ inabilities, is occasionally used in the paper because it is the preferred term of the Irish Department of Education and Science (DES).

Ireland’s Growing Diversity

Emigration was not just a fact of life in 20th century Ireland, it was one of the great tragedies of the modern Irish state. Indeed, the nostalgia and melodrama associated with young people once more having to leave a free and independent Ireland in search of work and a better standard of living comprised one of its defining myths (Lee, 1989). The first great wave of 20th century emigration from Ireland occurred in the 1950s – a period of economic and cultural dormancy; an economic upturn followed in the 1960s and 1970s, so much so, that some emigrants returned to Ireland. However, the effects of this interlude were fairly minimal and the 1980s, when Ireland should have been enjoying the status of being a member of the European Union, saw a return once again to the emigration levels of the 1950s, with about 2% of the population leaving in 1988–89 alone (Mac Éinrí, 2001: 48).

Towards the close of the century, from the mid-1990s onwards, however, the economic outlook began to improve, as the result of a number of factors. The discourse about Ireland also changed: the Emerald Isle became the Celtic Tiger, and the land of emigration suddenly found itself in need of a new supply of labour. Unemployment hit a low of 3.9% in 2001, and as Mac Éinrí points out, ‘While problems of social exclusion, literacy and poor education and training still exist, there is no longer a substantial reserve of unemployed persons’ (Mac Éinrí, 2001: 50). Initially, the search for new labour confided itself to the Irish diaspora. Recruitment fairs, advertising high skills jobs, began to be held during Christmas holidays and summer holidays in the hope of persuading visiting emigrants with the slogan: ‘Home for the holidays, why not stay for good?’.

However, despite extensive return migration by people born in Ireland and immigration by people of Irish background, shortages still prevailed. Alongside immigration from other EU countries, the state began issuing visas and work permits to citizens of non-EU countries, and immigration became a fact of daily life in Ireland, something that was unthinkable only a decade before.

The number of work permits issued by the state has increased from 6,000 in 1999 to more than 47,000 in 2003, and the leading countries of origin of immigrants are Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Philippines, South Africa, India, Romania, China, Brazil and Australia (DETE, 2004). These individuals are predominantly employed in the services sector, catering, agriculture and fisheries, and medicine and nursing. Along with economically motivated migrants, Ireland has also begun to experience an increased number of asylum seekers, something that was also fairly limited in the pre-Celtic Tiger era, although the figures are relatively small by international standards. Since 2000, the Irish Refugee Council estimates that about 5275 people have been recognised as refugees. Nigeria is by far the most significant country of origin of asylum applicants.
in Ireland, followed by Romania, Congo, China and Somalia (Irish Refugee Council, 2004).

The melodramatic myth of the tragic emigrant people is not the only one to be overturned in this new context. Ireland’s tourist brand of ‘céad míle fáilte’ or ‘Land of the 100,000 Welcomes’ has also been severely challenged. As Niall Crowley, Director of the Equality Agency puts it, ‘Nostalgic and self-indulgent perspectives of Ireland as “Ireland of the Welcomes” have ... founderd on the experience of multi-ethnic Ireland’ (Crowley, 2001: 179). A good example of this is the whole area of education. To quote Dónal Ó Loinsigh, ‘The lack of provision [in education] for any culture other than that which is perceived as the culture of the dominant group is obvious in our society’ (2001: 115). He points to the contradiction between theory and practice in the availability of education for those who fall outside or do not subscribe to this dominant culture. For example, the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) states, ‘The right of parents to send children to a school of their choice should be promoted’. However, as he puts it, ‘What real choice is offered to parents of ethnic and religious minority children under our present structures ... the reality is that they are going to be educated mainly in the existing denominational schools, which are mainly Catholic’ (Ó Loinsigh, 2001: 117). The current policy of both the Department of Education and Science and the main teaching unions is one of interculturalism, which they define as ‘different cultures living together with a mutual respect for each other and with social integration’ (Tuffy, 2002). While many schools are embracing this policy as best they can, the challenge of promoting intercultural education not only requires a change in the ethos and culture of schools, but also a rethink of management, administration and resourcing, which, to date, have been structured and organised to suit the dominant culture.

Unlike these cultural and religious aspects, the Irish education system is in fact in linguistic terms organised to encourage bilingualism and education in two languages of instruction, namely Irish and English. In constitutional terms, Irish is the first language of the Republic of Ireland and English is the second (Foley & Lalor, 1995). While Irish is not the dominant language of everyday communication in Ireland, it is privileged in a number of domains, in particular primary education, and its symbolic significance within the Republic should not be underestimated (e.g. Edwards, 1994). Furthermore, the Gaelscoileanna movement has led to an ever-increasing number of Irish-medium schools (Gaelscoileanna) on the initiative of parents. It is worth noting that these schools are being established in areas outside the designated Irish-speaking areas or Gaeltacht and are growing in popularity with long admissions waiting lists.

Prior to the economic changes outlined above, a small number of students were enrolled in Irish primary schools who did not speak English or Irish, the two languages of instruction, as a first language, and they simply ‘fitted in’ in a kind of sink-or-swim approach. However, due to increasing numbers of children from non-English-speaking countries (an estimated 15,600 non-English-speaking children between the ages of 0 and 14 immigrated to Ireland between 1996 and 2002 [CSO, 2003]), a new policy has been necessitated. What is particularly interesting is that because of the official commitment to the Irish language, there is also a commitment to linguistic diversity in educational provision. For instance, the Education Act 1998 states that the ‘language and cultural needs of
students, having regard to the choices of their parents, should be catered for’ (Government of Ireland, 1998: 118). However, it is fairly clear that the provisions of the Act were formulated before the recent immigration trend, so the only language needs envisaged here are those of Irish speakers. Nevertheless, this legal guarantee creates a context within which linguistic minorities could potentially claim education rights in languages other than Irish and English.

Despite the status of Irish and its importance in the primary curriculum, English is taught to immigrant children as a priority over Irish. Parents can apply to opt out of Irish, but only children who arrive in Ireland after a certain age, have special needs, or do not speak English qualify for exemption. Although this exemption may be greeted with relief by those struggling to learn English in a new educational and cultural context, it is perhaps a short-sighted policy. Knowledge of the Irish language, we would argue, is important for understanding many cultural and official aspects of everyday life in Ireland (e.g. much of the nomenclature). Furthermore, as stated above, intercultural education is currently a goal of the main teaching unions and the Department of Education and Science, and the realisation of such a policy would surely be greatly helped by having a more diverse body of teachers who had themselves experienced an intercultural existence. However, exercising this choice to be exempted from Irish instruction effectively excludes these children from access to the teaching profession. Despite the possibility of opting out, many non-national students do still learn Irish and outperform some of their Irish peers (Cohen, 2000).

So, to summarise, the context of this particular case study is that of an education system that is designed to cater for autochthonous linguistic diversity but with little experience of cultural and religious diversity in a country experiencing an unprecedented level and rate of economic and social change and being exposed for the first time to increased levels of allochthonous cultural and linguistic diversity. A final important point about the particularity of the Irish context is that the changes being experienced over a relatively short period of time in Ireland have been lived through over a longer period of time by other countries in the economically affluent regions of the world. Thus, Ireland has many role models and examples of practice to draw on. In an attempt to see what Ireland has learned from the experience of other countries and to describe and situate Ireland’s response relative to other countries, the literature documenting theory, policy and practice in educating language minority students is reviewed below.

**Approaches to Teaching Language Minority Students**

Beginning in the early 1970s, many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states’ immigrant populations experienced growth, leading to an increase in linguistic and cultural diversity. Immigrants represent a significant portion of the population in many English-speaking countries, including Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Unlike Ireland, which develops education policy at the national level, all of these countries have a decentralised system of government where individual states or provinces and local education authorities are given decision-making power concerning educational provision.
Education authorities typically choose one of four common approaches related to teaching EAL students: (1) ‘a sink-or-swim approach’ where students are assigned to a regular class with no support, typically the universal practice when only a few language minority students enrol in a school; (2) ‘a withdrawal approach’ where students are assigned to a mainstream classroom but receive additional help in a pull-out period with a language support teacher; (3) ‘a supported integration approach’ where a child remains in the mainstream classroom but receives assistance from a language support teacher; or (4) ‘a bilingual education approach’ where the mother tongue of the children is used for instruction. Linguists and researchers favour a bilingual approach, where practical, or supported instruction in the mainstream classroom over withdrawal programmes (Coelho, 1998; Moore, 1999).

Despite this, schools have typically opted for a withdrawal or pull-out support programme citing logistical reasons or tradition rather than research (Moore, 1999). Separate teaching of LEP students is juxtaposed against hope for integration (Glenn & de Jong, 1996). Likewise, many schools tend to operate under a system that effectively assigns responsibility to the language support teacher. In reality, the contribution of the class teacher is a key factor, and appropriate awareness will greatly enhance a child’s second language acquisition (Sears, 1998). Supported by research, a shift is taking place from using a largely withdrawal-based teaching model to developing a more integrated approach typically involving a system of support teachers and bilingual assistants who work in coordination with the class teacher (Verma et al., 1995), particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

National government funding usually takes the form of block grants awarded to local education authorities (LEAs), a term used in the United Kingdom equivalent to the term school district in Canada and the United States. In turn, this funding is supplemented to varying degrees at the local level, and LEAs are free to determine the structure of their programme to teach EAL children. While provision can vary widely, even within one country, due to this freedom, several methods of practice developed in other countries provide excellent models for comparison with the current Irish policy and inform its continued movement towards best practice in English language teaching.

An example of one LEA’s response is the Multicultural Education Service established by the Northamptonshire (England) County Council to address the language, cognitive and social needs of students (Martin, 2003; Turner & Francombe, 1995). The service assigns support teachers to schools to provide EAL instruction and coordinates training programmes for mainstream teachers. The teachers assigned by the service provide direct teaching support in the mainstream classroom and give advice to class teachers. Young pupils are assigned bilingual assistants. In addition, the Northamptonshire County Council has assigned Equality Advisers to work with individual schools to improve the academic achievement of minority students by developing action plans in collaboration with support teachers. Because support teachers are expected to work in partnership with class teachers, the Multicultural Education Service developed a training programme for mainstream teachers called ‘Towards Equality in the Classroom’. Finally, Northamptonshire County Council has a Home School
Liaison team charged with advising minority parents about the education system and their child’s progress.

In 1998, the Vancouver (Canada) School Board revised their English as a second language (ESL) policy (McGivern & Eddy, 1999; Vancouver School Board, 2003) which provides facilities, staff and resources through English Language Centres (ELCs) in neighbourhood schools. The Oakridge Reception and Orientation Centre was established in 1989, and as of 1999, it has assessed and placed 34,587 students. Rather than one model, the Vancouver School Board uses three distinct models, depending on the language needs of each individual student. Under the ‘Reception Model’, students are placed in a class with up to 20 ESL students or receive full-time support from a language support teacher in the mainstream classroom and pull-out sessions in the ELC. The second option, the ‘Transition Model’, incorporates a wide variety of support structures including pull-out sessions of less than 180 minutes per week, support within the mainstream classroom and content classes taught by the language support and/or class teacher. Finally, under the ‘Integration Model’, students who have stronger proficiency but are having difficulty reaching grade-level demands receive support from the classroom teacher who in turn receives guidance from the language support teacher. A survey showed that, in reality, these options are not universally available to all students (McGivern & Eddy, 1999).

The State of Victoria (Australia) Department of Education and Training traditionally followed an assimilationist model until the Department drafted a new multicultural education policy (State of Victoria Department of Education, 1997; State of Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2003) that establishes several programmes to improve the educational experience of immigrant students and their peers. Multicultural education aides (MEAs) work in the mainstream classroom to support English acquisition. They are also assigned the responsibility of acting as liaison between parents and teachers. The MEAs are supported by ESL specialists in the Languages and Multicultural Education Resources Centre. The Centre offers a 10-week professional development course for mainstream class teachers and other training opportunities for MEAs. The Centre also coordinates translation services to enhance communication with parents and operates a large lending library to provide schools with a variety of multimedia materials to support English language instruction. Finally, using funding support from the national Ethnic Schools Programme, the Department of Education and Training organises the Languages Other Than English programme designed to support mother tongue maintenance as well as teach monolingual students a second language.

As this brief overview indicates, a wide variety of good practice examples are available to Irish education authorities to exploit in an attempt to meet the needs of EAL students. The next section looks at how the Irish government has responded at a policy level to meeting the needs of EAL students.

**Ireland’s English Language Educational Initiatives**

The first formal initiative set forth by the Department of Education and Science (DES) related to teaching EAL children was a Visiting Teacher Service established in 1992. In 1996, the Centre for Language and Communication
Studies at Trinity College Dublin was commissioned to write a report, *Meeting the Language Needs of Refugees in Ireland* (Little, 2000), which led to the creation of the Refugee Language Support Unit (RLSU), now called Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT). This agency was charged with developing courses for adult refugees as well as benchmarks for primary and post-primary EAL students.

Because the Visiting Teacher Service was becoming increasingly inadequate as the number of EAL students continued to grow, Education Minister Micheál Martin introduced a new provision in January 2000. The cornerstone of this provision was the establishment of funding schemes available to primary and post-primary schools. Funding amounts depend on each school’s EAL student enrolment (Table 1). Schools with fewer than three students ‘would be expected to provide for the educational provisions of those pupils from their existing resources’ (DES, 2003a). Schools that qualify for a temporary teacher also qualify for a one-time start-up grant when they first apply for an English language support teacher. In addition, two other Department publications describe a top-up grant available to schools in each subsequent year of support, although this is conspicuously absent in a recent letter sent to principals (DES, 2003a, 2003b).

Students are limited to two years of English language support, which is strictly enforced, though some students have been granted an extension if the school makes a strong case (DES Inspectorate, 2003; Lazenby Simpson, 2003). Hakuta *et al.* (2000) suggest it takes two to five years for oral proficiency to be mastered and four to seven for academic proficiency. Collier’s (1989) review of research in this area indicates a range of 4 to 10 years to equal native-speaker academic performance. Cummins’s (1981) analysis determined it takes five to seven years for students to approach grade level standards on norm-referenced tests. According to Cummins’s (2003) revised model of language proficiency, three complementary and overlapping language competencies must be developed before students will be able to achieve academic success. These are conversational fluency, a small fraction of potential language resources, typically the language ability of a five-year-old native speaker; discrete language skills such as phonemic awareness and grammar; and, finally, academic language. Students’ face-to-face language often hides any academic language deficiencies, which Cummins (1984: 4) refers to as the ‘linguistic façade’. While EAL students may manifest conversational fluency by the end of two years of support, it is highly unlikely that academic language proficiency is fully developed. Therefore, prematurely exiting students from support programmes may upset their...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of EAL Students</th>
<th>0-2</th>
<th>3-8</th>
<th>9-13</th>
<th>14-23</th>
<th>24+</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Funding Allowance</td>
<td>€0</td>
<td>€638.69</td>
<td>€9523.04</td>
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<td>Two temporary teachers</td>
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<td>€0</td>
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<td>Top-up Continuance Grant</td>
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<td>€0</td>
<td>€0</td>
<td>€314</td>
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*Sources:* DES (2003), DES Inspectorate (2003)
academic development, particularly if the mainstream classroom is unresponsive as far as assisting their continued language acquisition.

After establishing the funding rules and time limit, the DES assigned responsibility for training teachers as well as providing curriculum materials and assessment tools to Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), which is fully funded by the DES. IILT was charged with developing a series of language proficiency benchmarks and assessment guidelines. To prepare these benchmarks, two focus groups comprising teachers who had LEA students in their classrooms were organised. The benchmarks were also grounded in those established by the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). The IILT benchmarks differ because they focus solely on language needed in the primary school academic environment (IILT, 2003a).

Based on these benchmarks, IILT created a version of the European Language Portfolio for primary schools (IILT, 2001), which is distributed to non-English speaking students, but only at the request of individual schools. Unfortunately, the Department does not notify IILT when schools qualify for funding, so until a school contacts IILT directly, the agency is unaware of their presence. In 2002, IILT distributed over 4000 of these portfolios (Lazenby Simpson, 2003). IILT has also developed curriculum materials to be used by language support teachers. These include sections of the IILT Language Training Manual as well as two additional books (IILT, 2002a, 2002b) distributed to language support teachers.

In addition to developing curriculum and assessment resources, IILT has established guidelines for teachers to manage the English language support programme. Students are to be placed in a mainstream classroom and withdrawn for a certain number of hours each week to work with a language support teacher (Lazenby Simpson, 2002). Both IILT and the DES recommend that students not be removed from any portions of the day that have a social component and require limited academic language. IILT discourages individual tutoring. Instead, class-based and group work is recommended (IILT, 2002b). IILT recommends giving more contact time to older children and children with little or no English upon entry (IILT, 2002c).

IILT’s final responsibility is to prepare language support teachers for their work with EAL students. A series of biannual training seminars is conducted throughout Ireland. In autumn 2002, 213 teachers, including 20 principals, participated in these seminars for the primary school level (Little & Lazenby Simpson, 2003). While language support teachers are not required to attend an IILT training seminar, the Department recommends attendance and pays all related expenses, though no funding is specifically provided to employ supply teachers to enable teachers to attend (DES Inspectorate, 2003).

The Study and Its Limitations
To compare the DES policies with actual practice in a number of primary schools concerning the instruction of EAL students, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with school representatives including one principal, 10 language support teachers and one class teacher. Galway City was chosen as the focus area. The Republic of Ireland’s fourth-largest city, Galway has a population of about 65,000 and is located on the west coast. This area has had a long
history of emigration; however, Galway too has experienced a boom in population growth, wealth and building as a result of the 'Celtic Tiger'. For instance, the population has grown by 15% since 1996 (CSO, 2003). In sociolinguistics terms, Galway is also a city on the edge of the Connemara Gaeltacht, one of the biggest and most significant Irish-speaking areas, and the city has a strong association with the language.

In order to make the study manageable, only information related to first-level education was considered. This research project was not intended to describe or analyse comprehensively the teaching model in use in each school. Therefore, no attempt can be made to judge the quality and success of each school’s instruction for its EAL students. Finally, because of the narrow focus on Galway City schools, this research cannot purport to represent how EAL students are being educated in all Irish primary schools. Instead, the decision to choose a small study field and conduct lengthy interviews was motivated by a desire to understand in detail how national policy is being implemented in one representative community.

Initially, a list of primary schools in Galway was formulated based on the official roll list from the DES (DES, 2002), which was cross-referenced with other local resources (Galway County Council, 2003; Galway Education Centre, 2003). This indicated a total of 23 primary schools in Galway City. From this list, six schools were eliminated because they fell into one of three categories: special schools, Gaelscoileanna and fee-paying schools. Special schools, whose students are deemed unable to access the national curriculum in a mainstream school, were eliminated because the educational experience of these special needs students is inherently more complex. The Gaelscoileanna were eliminated because of their use of Irish as the medium of instruction. Finally, fee-paying schools were not included in the study because they would not be able to avail of any governmental support.

After eliminating these schools, 17 remained. Each school was contacted either in person or by phone to determine if EAL students were currently enrolled and to arrange an interview with a school official, preferably a language support teacher, principal or classroom teacher. These initial contacts indicated that 13 schools had at least one EAL student enrolled at present. This information was based on statements made by school principals rather than official enrolment records. It would be difficult to confirm the accuracy of these numbers because while records are kept centrally by the Department, these numbers only reflect schools that have applied for a full-time English language support teacher or who have applied for a grant to hire a part-time teacher.

In total, 12 school representatives from 10 schools, representing all but three of the schools admissible for the purposes of this study, agreed to participate in an interview at their school sites (Table 2). A total of 10 language support teachers

<table>
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<th>Table 2 Primary schools in Galway City</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of primary schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schools meeting selection criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schools meeting selection criteria with EAL students</td>
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<td>Participating schools</td>
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participated as well as one principal teacher and one classroom teacher. These interviews took place between 20 May and 18 June 2003. Ethical approval for the study was received from the University of Limerick Ethics Committee, and school personnel gave written consent before being interviewed.

Results

Profile of Galway City Schools and their EAL populations

According to our initial contacts with principals from each of the 17 schools, approximately 250 EAL students were at that time enrolled in Galway primary schools. For the schools represented in the formal interviews as part of this study, school officials reported an EAL enrolment of 238 students. Thus, the study covers the majority of EAL students in Galway primary schools. EAL students represent about 8% of the population of these schools (238/2972). School officials identified 48 different countries of origin, with most students coming from African and Eastern European countries.

A wide range exists between schools as far as EAL enrolment, even when they share the same attendance area (Figures 1 and 2). As previously mentioned, four schools reported having no EAL students while six reported having over 27 students each. This disparity between schools is highlighted even more when EAL student numbers are compared with each school’s general population. While the mean percentage was just under 10% in the schools that participated in the interview process, two schools reported that over 18% of their enrolment consisted of EAL students. It is worth noting that these two schools reported having large student populations who qualify for additional educational support including learning support for Travellers and autistic children.

In schools that have at least one language support teacher, the numbers of EAL students per teacher are also quite disparate (Figure 3). The mean student–teacher ratio, when considering the number of full-time equivalent teachers, was 21.3:1; however, this masks a wide disparity, with one school having one teacher for 37 students, while another school with a part-time language support teacher had just six students. This disparity demonstrates the unequal nature of the current provision, in part because of the funding rules but also in part because of how they are being applied in individual schools. Schools are free to make their own decisions about how to use any grant aid unless the funding is for a full-time designated language support teacher, though this funding can be somewhat manipulated as well. For example, one teacher explained that the school qualifies for two full-time language support teachers, but one of these teachers is working as a class teacher instead of specifically teaching EAL students.

Teachers were asked about the residency status of their students, and most reported not being sure or not enquiring directly. Some schools, notably the two schools with high EAL percentages, reported having high numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers. Other schools reported a mixture of children whose parents are migrant workers, students, refugees and asylum-seekers.

According to the language support teachers, students face academic difficulties because they may not be fully capable of communicating and participating in the mainstream classroom. Research supports this by explaining that EAL students have to perform at a higher level because they are trying to understand
English as an Additional Language in Irish Education

Figure 1 EAL student enrolment by school in Galway City

Figure 2 EAL percentage of total school population in participating schools

Figure 3 EAL student–ELST ratios
new concepts through a language they do not fully understand (McKeon, 1994). Three teachers mentioned the unique situation faced by students who have a limited or incomplete education in their home country and struggle to succeed academically in this new context. Teachers mentioned that children often feel frustrated and inadequate, particularly in subjects such as maths and science, because they have the requisite knowledge base but are unable to demonstrate it due to a language barrier.

In addition to these academic challenges their students face, teachers mentioned other difficulties related to being an immigrant in a new country and educational system. As one teacher explained,

... the needs are not just about language. It’s about exacting this huge emotional gap in a child’s life... they don’t have anything from their own country. They just go, which means we’ll never probably understand the level of trauma which caused that.

This same teacher, as well as others, specifically mentioned the difficult circumstances in which asylum-seeking students under direct provision are trying to learn and succeed at school. Confirming information about the living conditions experienced by asylum seekers in an Irish Refugee Council report (Fanning et al., 2001), this teacher explained that these students share a small room with their parents, have little possessions or personal space, are receiving an inadequate diet and are unable to socialise easily with children who do not share their circumstances.

Several teachers also stressed that students must not only learn the language but also social customs and appropriate behaviours for their new school and home environments. As teachers mentioned, immigrant children have difficulty negotiating the classroom including knowing how to join group activities, how to stand in line and other behaviours, something also affirmed in other contexts and studies (for example, Gregory, 1997).

**Awareness and evaluation of government initiatives**

The level of awareness concerning the government programmes and funding available for teaching EAL primary students is uneven in Galway schools according to the results of this study. Of the 10 schools that participated in the interviews, eight were receiving designated funding. The remaining two schools reported being generally unaware of the government supports for this instructional area, even though one of the schools would in fact be eligible for a grant from the government for this teaching area, on the basis of data reported to us. At schools that were availing of the special funding, language support teachers reported a lack of knowledge about the exact funding rules, particularly the supplementary grants given to schools. All but one teacher believed funding rules need to be specified more clearly.

Concerning IILT (Integrate Ireland Language and Training), all the language support teachers were aware of this agency, though some confusion existed as to its purpose. Nine of the 10 language support teachers interviewed had participated in at least one IILT training seminar, and all reported having access to the training handbook and curriculum materials.
The English language support teacher: Qualifications, role and status

In initial contacts with all schools, it was determined that there were 14 language support teachers, two of which were part-time, working in primary schools in Galway City who met the study criteria (Table 3). Five schools qualified for two full-time language support teachers, though one school allocates this staffing differently. Of these language support teachers, 10 agreed to be interviewed. The rest of the results come from the responses of these 10 language support teachers.

When asked about their qualifications and training, three teachers reported being fully qualified as primary school teachers in Ireland. One teacher was a qualified secondary teacher. An additional three teachers had been granted provisional recognition as primary teachers, a qualification given to teachers who received their training outside Ireland and have not demonstrated fluency in the Irish language. The remaining three reported having no primary school teaching qualification. These three teachers came from a variety of backgrounds, including hotel management and the arts.

In terms of TESOL experience, six teachers reported having some previous experience of teaching English as a foreign language; however, this was mostly to adults abroad, and only four of these teachers had a Teaching English as a Foreign Language certificate. This lack of appropriate expertise and experience is indicative, perhaps, of how the position is viewed within individual schools and its temporary status and lack of professional recognition by the DES.

As stated previously, all teachers except one had participated in at least one of the IILT training seminars. Beyond this, few teachers reported taking advantage of any additional training, mainly because of the lack of suitable opportunities. Several teachers mentioned participating in workshops on multicultural education, racism and working with children of asylum seekers and refugees.

From their own experience in the post, language support teachers cited a variety of skills needed for their position. Many of these abilities, such as the desire to relate to children and the ability to manage a classroom environment, are required for primary school teaching in general, though teachers stressed that they are even more important when communication with students is not always based on a common language. Six teachers mentioned the need for patience, and others remarked that teachers must be creative and imaginative in the ways they present new ideas. Teachers also mentioned the need for flexibility and adaptability. They reported how important this skill is when managing so

Table 3 Participating schools’ language support staffing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating schools</th>
<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>One full-time ELST</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with a part-time ELST</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools ineligible for funding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible schools not receiving funding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
many different ages, language levels and timetables. Finally, they indicated the 
need for teachers to have compassion for their students’ situations and the desire 
to understand their needs. This inventory of teacher qualities suggested by 
teachers could be useful information for developing future training opportuni-
ties for new and continuing language support teachers.

Many teachers mentioned problems and challenges related to the temporary 
nature of the posts. The mean length is 12.3 months in post, and the very high 
deviation shows the wide range (Figure 4). Two teachers reported being in the 
post for only three months.

When asked if they would be returning to the post in the 2003–2004 school 
year, just three teachers knew they would be in the position. The rest reported 
being uncertain about their future employment. One teacher felt confident that 
the position would remain while waiting for funding confirmation from the DES. 
Four other teachers were awaiting staffing decisions from the principal, even 
though the DES had approved funding for the coming school year. Since the 
interviews, three of these four teachers reported that although they had asked to 
be a language support teacher for another year they had been reassigned to other 
teaching posts within the school. This lack of job security makes the language 
support teacher position less attractive to qualified teachers. Likewise, it appears 
wasteful to rotate the position so frequently just as teachers develop their skills 
and gain valuable experience.

Many language support teachers take on a number of additional responsibili-
ties in their school and community. Two teachers mentioned organising multi-
cultural events and intercultural education for the school, and two teachers 
reported being the first contact for any immigrant families in the community. 
Beyond these responsibilities, six teachers reported being asked to substitute in 
other classrooms when a teacher was absent due to illness, personal time or 
attendance at a workshop. One teacher reported substituting three days during 
the week of the interview. Others reported only being asked to cover classes a 
few times in the year. This request for coverage was particularly common in 
schools with two language support teachers. Often one would be asked to substi-
tute on a regular basis while the other teacher rarely did. Teachers who substi-
tuted explained that on those days their EAL students did not receive structured 
language support. This practice, while not only devaluing the language support

![Figure 4 Length of time as an ELST](C:\edrive\LE-old\2005f-old\la2005f.vp)
teacher’s role in the school, effectively denies EAL students the educational support which the funding is intended to provide.

Many schools tend to operate under a system that effectively assigns responsibility to the language support teacher (Glenn & de Jong, 1996), which seems to be the general situation in the schools which participated in the research project. The majority of Galway language support teachers believed they had positive working relationships with classroom teachers in their school. They cited occasional sharing of resources and informal conversations. One teacher writes detailed written reports that are shared with the class teacher, while others see each classroom teacher daily and ‘grab moments here and there’ to communicate. However, indicating that these positive relationships are not universal, others said that their relationships with class teachers were strained. This was particularly true for two teachers, both on provisional recognition. Interestingly, both of the teachers had the desire to try more cooperative teaching arrangements and expected mainstream teachers to accept more responsibility for the teaching of EAL students in their classroom. As one of the respondents commented:

I think that training is definitely needed for the ordinary classroom teacher because they’re the person who has the children for the majority of the time. . . . I think in some cases . . . it’s not really been taken on board that they’re actually the responsible teacher. I’m additional . . .

In terms of involving parents, who can be important educators supporting the efforts made within the school (Turner, 1997), two teachers said they act as an interpreter when possible to communicate with parents. Several teachers indicated that older students or siblings are often used as interpreters, though academics discourage this because of the sensitive nature of some topics (Coelho, 1998). Teachers reported that the vast majority of parents have a minimum amount of English in order to participate meaningfully in a conversation with a teacher. Two teachers organised events for parents of EAL students in order to foster better relationships with each family.

The language support teachers identified a variety of reasons why they enjoy their teaching role. Several said they felt that they were making a difference in their students’ lives by helping them integrate and gain access to the language of instruction and socialisation. They described their students as eager to learn and enjoyed watching their rapid rate of progress. Two teachers also mentioned that one of the rewards of the post was learning about other cultures by interacting with their students.

While teachers listed many rewarding aspects associated with being a language support teacher, they also identified many challenges inherent in the position. Most of these were related to not having adequate resources and an appropriate place for instruction. One teacher works in the back of the classroom, which limits her options as far as activities and teaching methods. In one school, two teachers are in two different corners of the school computer laboratory, which is used by other classes as well. One teacher has been allocated space in the staff room, which requires packing and unpacking instructional materials twice a day. Of the teachers interviewed, six reported having their own dedicated space, but often this was more the size of an office than a classroom. This lack of
appropriate space could be viewed as another indication that this educational provision is not valued and fully resourced.

**Teaching models and methodologies in use**

The teaching of EAL students in primary schools in Galway follows a fairly typical pattern. Most students work with their language support teacher in a withdrawal situation, usually in small groups. In fact, all teachers said they use this teaching method, though one teacher reported only having a group session once a week during ‘Circle Time’, a session where students gather to talk, play games and interact with one another. All teachers also indicated that they do one-on-one work in certain situations, particularly with low-literacy students. Eight of the 10 teachers interviewed said they use this teaching model on a regular basis. None of the teachers interviewed regularly teach in a mainstream classroom in cooperation with the class teacher. Two teachers reported doing this in the past, but they cited logistical reasons for discontinuing this practice. Only one teacher expressed a desire to try to do more teaching using such a model, but this teacher felt it was impossible due to the lack of precedence for such a method of support. The range of time a student may spend with a language support teacher depends on their skill level, typically according to the guidelines set out by IILT. Based on the teachers’ responses, a rough average of the number of minutes of withdrawal group servicing a student receives was calculated for each school (Table 4). Most teachers indicated a range, which was converted into an average amount of contact time per week. This indicated a mean of 123 minutes per week. While this may not accurately portray the exact amount of contact time each student receives, it gives some insight into the highly varied lengths of time students may receive targeted language support. This wide disparity is possibly due to individual school decisions as well as the uneven nature of the funding scheme.

During withdrawal-type small-group sessions, several language support teachers in Galway schools report using a wide range of activities to teach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELST</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Average number of minutes per week</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>160–200</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>60–840</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>70–140</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>60–120</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>60–135</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>60–150</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>90–150</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>120–250</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>60–180</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Teacher uses one-to-one teaching except for a ‘circle time’ session each week. Not included in mean.
English as an Additional Language in Irish Education

English that require active, cooperative work between students. These include drama, art, discussion, games and field trips. One language support teacher favours outings for teaching, such as trips to the veterinarian to get a cat neutered, a rugby game after school, visits to the greengrocer and a visit to a ship in the dockyards. This teacher also organised a play that students created using phrasal verbs to share their experiences related to living in a hotel under direct provision while waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. Others mentioned planting flowers and taking walks. Language support teachers also mentioned the value of using tape and video recorders, books at all levels and computer-based learning. Three teachers assign homework, and several coordinate work that students can complete on their own in the mainstream classroom during Irish lessons or activities that the student is deemed unable to participate in because of a language barrier. Eight of the 10 teachers said they devote some time to assisting students with their mainstream class homework, typically during their regular meetings with students.

Although interviewees were not asked directly, none reported any efforts by the school to support students’ mother tongue education, though research consistently concludes that EAL students’ mother tongues need to be valued and developed as English proficiency grows (Baker, 2001; Demie et al., 2003). This issue merits further research within an Irish context.

Finally, it is valuable to present the practices at the two schools that did not employ a language support teacher at the time either because they did not qualify or were unaware of the funding provisions. In one classroom, the class teacher uses a lot of dictation and sentence-copying. In the other school, teachers work occasionally with these students individually and adapt work as necessary. In both situations, school officials were of the opinion that students were succeeding and learning most from being in social situations with their peers. Even so, this may only indicate that students have developed conversational fluency but will continue to experience difficulty using English in an academic setting and as a medium for learning information in other content areas.

Conclusion

In attempting to draw some conclusions about policy and practice relating to the needs of EAL children in primary schools, the comments of one English language support teacher interviewed in our study are particularly appropriate:

...It’s just snuck up on the Department [of Education and Science] really... I think they just think it’s going to go away at some stage, not really realising that it (has) changed completely because you will always have new children, siblings of the children who are in the country now who might not be coming in here with English, you know, other than what they pick up from the kids on the street...

From our brief survey, it would appear that government policy has been primarily reactive, with agencies and schools attempting to deal with the issue as if it were something short-term. Furthermore, despite the availability of best practice models from other contexts and the degree of experience that could be
drawn on, the Irish policy seems to have been developed primarily in isolation from this literature and expertise.

Because of this lack of an overall long-term strategy, individual experiences in terms of contact hours, conditions and content are radically different, even within this small survey. It is not an exaggeration to speculate that the future academic and linguistic development of children attempting to learn English as an additional language in Irish primary schools depends on factors such as conditions prevailing in particular schools and luck in terms of space allocation, teacher qualifications, interest and commitment, and even something as arbitrary as whether or not another teacher in the school is absent on a particular day.

Furthermore, in an education system that is at the official and organisational level constituted to support a language other than English, namely Irish, this experience of bilingualism would not appear to have been exploited at all in providing for these bilingual children. Indeed, one wonders whether the promotion of English as an additional language for these children could be proving ideologically difficult for a context that, in theory at least, is committed to promoting and protecting the Irish language. In such a situation, this new imperative could be seen as yet another threat to Irish, something that might explain the very limited resources and poor working conditions afforded to the teachers of EAL students. We could speculate on many possible reasons for this lack of a strategic and long-term response to meeting the needs of EAL students in Irish schools; however, one reason that does seem to come through in all of the results presented here – and one that is echoed in other government discourse about immigration, work permits, asylum etc. – is the denial by the government and authorities that this is a long-term situation. There seems to be little political desire to accept the notion that Ireland has become a country of net immigration, to understand what that means and to design educational and other policies appropriate to this new situation.

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Notes

1. For example, partnership agreements between the unions, government and employers kept wages under control; the painful restructuring of what heavy industry there was in the 1980s finally began to bear fruit, as did the structural funds from the EU; a liberal tax regime and other incentives attracted increasing levels of foreign direct investment, particularly from the American IT sector, and, finally, the spawning of a new breed of homegrown entrepreneur and risk-taker brought domestic innovation.
2. Parents apply directly to a primary school in order to enrol their child, and an enrolment committee from each school determines if an opening exists in the school. Parents are free to attempt to enrol their children in any school.
3. The term Travellers refers to an indigenous minority community within Ireland that traditionally followed a nomadic lifestyle and is afforded legal protection from discrimination under Irish law.
4. Under the policy of direct provision, asylum-seekers’ basic needs are taken care of by the government directly, including meals and accommodation in hotels, hostels and
reception centres throughout the country. A living supplement of €19.05 per adult and €9.52 per child is provided each week.

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IILT (2002a) *English Language-Teaching Materials Based on Units of Work of the Primary Curriculum*. Dublin: IILT.


* Dates listed for these references authored by the Department of Education and Science are estimated because no dates of publication could be found. The 2003 references were mailed by the Department to a school in 2003, though it is not certain they were written that year.