Ireland

Department of Education and Skills
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Eemer Eivers
Educational Research Centre

Language and Literacy

Ireland is officially a bilingual state; Irish is the national and first official language, and English is recognized as a second official language.[1] In practice, almost all people speak English on a daily basis, while the most recent census data available (2006) indicate that approximately 41 percent of the population are able to speak Irish.[2] Irish is the community language in pockets of *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking) areas and is used daily by some people outside the *Gaeltacht*. The Government aims to ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual (Irish and English) and is committed to providing the option of Irish-medium education, both in *Gaeltacht* and non-*Gaeltacht* areas. Thus, in addition to English-medium schools, Ireland has Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools in *Gaeltacht* areas, and a network of Irish-medium schools in non-*Gaeltacht* areas (*scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge*). Because fluency in Irish is not a requirement for enrolment at Irish-medium schools, Irish is often not the mother tongue of students attending these schools. Two additional major national policy initiatives promote literacy. First, learning support teaching (supplemental teaching for children experiencing learning difficulties, particularly in the core areas of literacy and numeracy) is generally available in all primary schools.[3] Second, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) program addresses educational disadvantage through improved student-teacher ratios in participating schools, special grants and extra support for students.[4]

Other initiatives to promote reading and literacy include the "Write a Book" project and the annual Children's Books Festival.[a, b] Many schools hold an annual Book Week to celebrate literature and further promote a love of reading among children. Many public libraries also provide a range of services to schools to promote reading and literacy, including supporting "One Town, One

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a   For more information on the "Write a Book" project, visit http://www.writeabookireland.com/index.asp

b   For more information on the Children's Books Festival, visit http://www.childrensbooksireland.ie

Book" initiatives (community-based literacy projects that promote networks of children and adult readers).

Overview of the Education System

Ireland's education system is largely centralized. Overall responsibility for education lies with the Minister for Education and Skills, who is a member of the Irish Government and responsible to the national parliament. In practice, the Department of Education and Skills (DES), together with a number of bodies under its aegis, is responsible for running the Irish education system. Almost all primary and post-primary schools are state-funded, and are required to operate under both the Education Act (1998)[5] and the curriculum, assessment, and evaluation framework established by the DES, based on advice from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA is a statutory body with responsibility for advising the Education Minister on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools. The inspectorate division of the DES has responsibility for evaluating and reporting on educational provision in all primary and post-primary schools and centers of education that are supported by the Department. Although state-funded, the majority of schools are owned and managed by private organizations, mainly church authorities or religious orders. Individual boards of management govern each school, which are expected to operate in accordance with centrally agreed-upon procedures.

The Irish education system comprises primary, post-primary, third-level, and further education. In addition, parents can send their children to one year of early childhood care and education, prior to starting primary school. Primary schools operate an eight-year program, consisting of two pre-primary years (Junior Infants and Senior Infants), followed by Grades (Classes) 1–6. A child must be four years old at the start of the school year (September) to enroll in primary school. Most children start school as Junior Infants, at either four or five years of age.

The Irish primary education sector comprises state-funded primary schools, special schools, and private primary schools. The 3,165 state-funded primary schools include religious schools, non-denominational schools, multi-denominational schools, and *scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge* (Irish-medium schools). All state-funded schools follow the Primary School Curriculum[6] and private schools offer a broadly similar curriculum.

Ireland has some variation in post-primary school types (e.g., vocational schools, comprehensive schools, and privately-owned and managed secondary schools). However, the curriculum offered in all is substantially the same. Second-level education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two-year senior cycle. Senior cycle can extend to three years if students opt to complete a "Transition Year" (a year free from formal examinations that allows students to experience a range of educational inputs, including work experience) following completion of junior cycle. Senior cycle students follow one of three programs, each leading to a terminal State examination: the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, or the Leaving Certificate Applied.

Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

While Ireland's Primary School Curriculum covers a broad range of subjects, literacy and numeracy are considered central to learning in all areas of the curriculum and to children's lives outside of school. Reading is formally taught under the language curriculum area (covering English and Irish). Two principles inform how reading is addressed for all class levels, including children at fourth grade. First, language learning is an integrated process. The three strands used to structure the curriculum—oral language, reading, and writing—are seen as intimately related because they interact with one another in language learning development. Second, language learning and learning through language are of equal importance. As such, the curriculum is concerned with the cultivation of the child's language skills and ability to use language. Language and reading are developed gradually. Initially, phonemic and phonological awareness are developed, followed by an introduction to sound-letter relationships and the eventual development of higher-order skills through reading and responding to a wide variety of texts in a print-rich environment.

In 2011, DES launched Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life,[7] a comprehensive national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people in the education system. The strategy sets broad national targets for literacy (e.g., increasing the percentage of primary school students attaining the highest proficiency levels in the National Assessment of English Reading by five percentage points by 2020). The targets are to be achieved through a coordinated approach, ranging from pedagogical

improvements in early childhood education, to curriculum reform, to improving awareness of the importance of home environment, to changes in teacher initial education and continuing professional development, and improved use of assessment (at individual, school, and system levels).

Summary of National Curriculum

Ireland's Primary School Curriculum includes the content for language development and describes the approaches and methodologies that teachers may use in their language work with children. The English curriculum describes literacy as the ability to read and write. The ability to read effectively is recognized as an essential requirement if children are to benefit fully from the educational process, to develop their potential, and to participate as citizens in society.

The curriculum presents learning content for all subjects in four levels, each consisting of a two-year grade band. The content for fourth grade falls under Level 3 (third and fourth grade). Planning at individual school and classroom levels indicates what is to be learned in third and fourth grades, when, and how.

As with the oral language and writing strands, the reading strand of the curriculum is divided into four strand units:

1. Receptiveness to Language—This strand unit includes the development of literacy and incorporates acquiring an appreciation of the conventions of text, knowledge of the terminology and conventions of books, and the ability to use a range of reading and comprehension skills. From the beginning of reading, children will recall and retell details of what they read and predict possible future outcomes. However, at the third and fourth grade, the curriculum identifies the development of skills such as analysis, synthesis, inference, deduction, summarization, evaluation, and correlation.

2. Competence and Confidence in Using Language—This strand unit includes enhancing children's abilities to use their developing awareness of language as readers as part of their overall language development. Building on a growing mastery of reading and comprehension skills, third and fourth grade children are expected to develop an appreciation for the usefulness of reading, and to develop personal tastes and interests (supported by exposure to a range of texts, regular silent reading, and by choice in selection of reading material). Independent reading is fostered by enabling children to use more than one strategy when

reading unfamiliar words, and by promoting the self-correction of reading errors.

3. Developing Cognitive Abilities Through Language—This strand unit focuses on using language to learn. The curriculum recognizes that reading is an increasingly important context for the development of children's cognitive abilities at third and fourth grade. Children are expected to engage with a range of expository and representational texts (e.g., forms, menus, recipes, timetables, newspapers, magazines, and text on screen). Fourth grade students are expected to develop their cognitive abilities through reading and responding to fiction and poetry, with the development of information retrieval skills becoming more central to reading.

4. Emotional and Imaginative Development Through Language—This strand unit is concerned with developing children's ability to explore everyday experiences and feelings. Children at third and fourth grade will extend and develop how they respond to increasingly challenging reading material.

The first two strand units are focused specifically on language learning, while the third and fourth contribute to more general aspects of children's development. Strand units contain detailed elements of the curriculum content. This content is presented in the form of content objectives, which include suggested learning experiences and activities. In keeping with the spiral nature of the curriculum, the breadth and complexity of the reading strands are developed as children move through primary school.

Approaches to English Reading

The English curriculum sets out a non-exhaustive range of reading approaches and methodologies presented in three key categories: learning to read, comprehension, and responding to text.[c, 8] Teachers, however, have professional autonomy in making decisions about what approaches they use to promote the learning of reading. The following descriptions outline the teaching approaches specific to the third and fourth grades that are currently identified under the three key categories:

♦ Learning to Read—The curriculum envisages that children will have developed competence in word recognition skills by the beginning of the third and fourth grade level. Structured reading schemes and class readers are expected to be complemented by a wide range of

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c   As part of the development of an integrated language curriculum, the English curriculum is being revised. From 2016, fourth grade children will experience a revised English curriculum in which learning outcomes and exemplification of standards will be key.

other reading material encompassing narrative, expository, and representational text to ensure continuing promotion of children's comprehension skills and interest in reading. Classroom libraries are expected to contain materials covering various levels of interest and ability so that all children can experience success and enjoyment in reading.

♦ Comprehension—The curriculum states that children's comprehension skills will be developed mainly through oral language activity. It highlights the need for third and fourth grade children to have a consistent and structured experience of questioning, discussing, and probing the text when developing higher-order comprehension skills. The curriculum advocates teacher modelling of comprehension skills (e.g., thinking aloud), supplemented by activities that include sequencing tasks, prediction assignments, and cloze procedures. While the use of written responses is greater from the third and fourth grade level onward, this approach is used as follow-up to discussion and other forms of oral response. The potential for developing children's comprehension skills through integration with other areas of the curriculum is also highlighted at this level.

♦ Responding to Text—The curriculum identifies the serial reading of a class novel at the third and fourth grade level as a particularly important means by which children can experience a shared response to fiction. The importance of giving children ample opportunities to respond orally to what they read also is emphasized. Children are encouraged to discuss individual choices of books and other reading materials with others. Children at the third and fourth grade level are expected to respond to their reading in a greater range of ways that include more opportunities for expression through personal writing, drama, visual arts, movement, and dance.

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

The English curriculum and the accompanying English Language Teacher Guidelines identify a number of instructional materials to support reading development in the primary school. These include graded reading schemes, class novels, and a broad range of reading materials in class and school libraries. Also, teachers can access the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) website (http://action.ncca.ie/), which demonstrates features of

effective teaching and learning in different settings and includes some materials that support the teaching of reading. In addition, the NCCA provides publishers with general principles and considerations, as well as detailed specifications for reading and activity materials for children at all class levels. However, no specific instructional materials for the teaching of English reading are prescribed. Schools make their own selections from the range of commercially published instructional materials and literature for children.

Use of Technology

Gradual investment in ICT in primary schools has increased provision of computers for students and interactive whiteboards for teachers. Also, teachers can access digital resources from a number of approved national educational websites. However, a recent study found that use of technology was a regular feature in only a minority of classrooms.[9] Reading instruction is mainly carried out in the traditional manner. Where technology is used, typical uses include interactive whiteboards to access online interactive resources, and visualizers, blogs, digital video, and presentation tools to explore language and to encourage children to express their thoughts in other formats.

Role of Reading Specialists

The class teacher normally provides reading instruction as part of the language curriculum. Also, within each school, a teacher usually has additional responsibility for the coordination of literacy instruction, including resource management and sharing good practice. While specialist posts such as learning support teachers may have a role in coordinating literacy instruction within schools, they primarily deal with small, selected groups of students with identified difficulties. Nationally, the Department of Education and Skills provides additional specialist advice through a regional network of professional development organizations led by the Professional Development Service for Teachers—providing support in all curricular areas, but with a strong emphasis on the core areas of literacy and numeracy.

Additional-language Instruction

As noted, Ireland has two official languages. The issue of additional-language applies largely to English-medium schools; few students attending Irish-medium schools speak a language other than Irish or English.

Schools with significant numbers of children for whom English is an additional language (EAL) can apply to have additional EAL Support teachers appointed. The numbers of eligible students and their English-language

proficiency determines the level of extra teaching support allocated. In collaboration with parents and class teachers, EAL Support teachers identify students who require additional support, assess their English language competence, devise and deliver appropriate language programs, and record and monitor their progress. However, EAL students remain the responsibility of the mainstream class teacher. Resources for EAL support teachers and for the whole school team are distributed to all primary schools.

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

Class teachers initially identify students at risk of reading difficulties through informal observation. Teacher observations are then complemented by screening measures (up to the middle of first grade) or by the results of standardized, norm-referenced tests (first grade onwards). Learning support teachers have access to a range of diagnostic tests and guidelines on interpreting the results. Educational psychologists may also be involved in the diagnostic process. The particular set of diagnostic tests administered depends on the student's stage of reading development.

Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

The DES promotes an inclusive approach and early intervention for students with reading difficulties. Class teachers have primary responsibility for the progress of all students in their classes; and, where appropriate, support teachers provide supplementary teaching. After initial diagnostic testing, the support teacher, in conjunction with the class teacher and usually the parents, produces an Individual Profile and Learning Program (IPLP). The IPLP includes specific learning targets to guide teaching for the 13–20 week instructional term. Instruction usually takes the form of small-group teaching (2–4 students) in the classroom or in a withdrawal setting, the latter being more common.[10] A program of activities in a reading session might include familiar reading, revision of reading strategies, the learning of new reading strategies, and the opportunity to read a new text.

A number of primary schools have specialist reading units, where one or more teachers teach students with specific reading difficulties. There are also four special reading schools for children with specific learning difficulties that follow the Primary School Curriculum with the exception of Irish. Children usually attend for one to two years only and then return to their original mainstream school. The usual admission criteria to a special reading school are average or

above average intelligence and a significant discrepancy between intellectual ability and literacy levels. Visually impaired students have the assistance of a DES visiting teacher service that advises on service provision, including assistive technology, to accommodate their learning needs. Those who have deteriorating minimal residual vision or who are totally blind may need to read and write through the medium of Braille.

Teachers and Teacher Education

Teaching in Ireland is an all-graduate profession. Primary teachers complete their initial teacher education either through a concurrent (3-year, full-time Bachelor of Education degree) or a consecutive (18-month, post-graduate diploma in education) model. It has been proposed that the length of initial teacher education be increased to four years for the concurrent model and two years for the consecutive model. For post-primary teachers, the concurrent route to a teaching qualification is offered for a broad range of programs, typically those with practical, workshop, and laboratory elements. The post-primary consecutive route is a one-year post-graduate professional diploma in education which has been proposed to increase to a minimum of two years.

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

At the primary level, the same teacher generally teaches all subjects to his or her class, and all primary school mainstream teachers are teachers of reading. As such, the teaching of reading is a key element of initial teacher education programs. However, prior to 2011, standard requirements specific to the teaching of reading were not established at any stage of the continuum of teacher education.[11] At the primary school level, specific targeted training has been provided to teachers in the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum, including the teaching of reading. Many teachers of students with special education needs hold post-graduate certificates or diplomas in learning support or special needs education. These programs, which are funded by the Teacher Education Section of the Department of Education and Skills, are provided by third level institutions. Specific targeted training has also been provided to teachers in interventions such as Reading Recovery and First Steps (listening and speaking, reading and writing) to support primary teachers in schools participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools program.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Although teachers are expected to participate regularly in professional development, doing so is not currently compulsory. From September 2012,

all newly-qualified teachers will need to complete a national induction program that will include specific components on the teaching of literacy and on assessment.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers and the Special Education Support Service are lead agencies for professional development at both primary and post-primary levels. Other sources include a national network of Education Centres and appropriate groups, bodies, and institutions that offer professional development programs from which teachers can select courses appropriate to their needs. Recent reports have highlighted that a significant minority of teachers had not completed any recent professional development related to literacy or numeracy.[12, 13] Consequently, national support services are currently directing considerable attention to these areas.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Section 22 of the Education Act requires schools "to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents." [14] More recent guidelines advise that schools report feedback to parents at least twice annually, including one written report.[15] There is evidence that a significant minority of schools do not provide adequate feedback to parents on a regular basis.[16, 17] At the primary level, school assessment approaches include the use of teacher questioning and observation, conferencing, and student self-assessment. Changes made in 2007 require schools to administer standardized tests in English and mathematics to students at two points: the end of first grade or the start of second grade, and at the end of fourth grade or the start of fifth grade. In practice, annual administration of standardized reading tests to all students from first through to sixth grade is almost universal. Individual schools choose their own assessment instruments, with the proviso that standardized tests have been normed for an Irish population and are consistent with the Primary School Curriculum. The *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy* (published in 2011) proposes improved reporting to parents and requires that, from 2012, all primary schools report annually to the Department of Education and Skills the aggregated standardized test results of students at three points of the primary school cycle—second, fourth, and sixth grades. There is no intention to publish data from individual schools or to make it possible for the data to be used for the compilation of league tables.

Although Ireland does not operate a national mandatory system of assessment for primary schools, it monitors standards through the regular assessment of reading and mathematics performance of students in a representative sample of schools. Every five years, the Educational Research Centre conducts national assessments of reading and mathematics on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. The main functions of the national assessments are to assess national standards, identify factors related to performance on the tests, and inform policy. Almost 8,000 students from second and sixth class took part in the most recent survey in 2009.

Impact and Use of PIRLS

PIRLS 2011 is the first time that Ireland has participated in PIRLS. As such, PIRLS has not had a significant impact on educational policies. However, Ireland participated in a precursor to PIRLS—IEA's International Reading Literacy Study (RLS), conducted in 1991. The performance of Irish nine-year-olds was in the average range (12th of 27 participating countries and 10th of 19 OECD countries in the study), while the performance of Irish 14-year-olds was slightly poorer (20th of 31 participating countries, and 16th of 19 OECD countries).

There have been no formal studies of the impact of participation in RLS; but, it is likely that certain changes can be attributed, at least partially, to participation. The RLS contributed to the thinking behind the current primary school English curriculum, on which work began in the early 1990s. For example, developers of the English curriculum were influenced by the categorization of text types used in RLS (narrative, expository, and documents) and by the range of comprehension processes assessed.

Although Ireland has not participated in PIRLS, both PIRLS and the RLS strongly influenced the three most recent national assessments of English reading conducted at the primary level in Ireland.[18, 19, 20] The influence is apparent in the frameworks used to underpin the assessments, the style of test items, and the range of questionnaires administered. Further, the methodologies used by the IEA in both PIRLS and the RLS have influenced how statistical analyses were conducted and results reported.

Suggested Readings

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In addition, a range of documents and reports can be accessed on the website of the Department of Education and Skills: http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/des_publication_listing.htm?language=EN

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