AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH IN THE TEACHING OF IRISH READING IN SENIOR PRIMARY CLASSES IN AN IMMERSION SCHOOL

In immersion settings in Ireland, most pupils are immersed in a language that is generally not their home language. In the senior classes, Irish and English reading is practised. But we have very little information on how children in immersion education read in Irish, in both languages, or on the skills and strategies they use when reading. There is a lack of guidance and research on the most effective way to promote dual literacy, or to meet the different needs of children across two languages. In order to promote inclusive practice, this knowledge is urgently needed. This study uses formative assessments, research articles and new reading material to encourage teachers to reflect on current practice. Focused reading groups are explored as a possibility to meet diverse needs and support teachers to build on their inclusive strategies with 9–11-year-olds.

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INTRODUCTION

The benefits of reading are widely recognised. Reading in a second language (L2) can enhance oral language and contribute to the full acquisition of the language (Day & Bamford, 2002; Hinkel, 2006; Stenson & Hickey, 2018). In Irish immersion schools, for the most part, Irish reading begins in the early years and English is introduced in the second or third school year (Ó Duibhir et al., 2017). In the early years, therefore, more time is spent on reading Irish than on reading English (Ó Duibhir, 2018). However, research shows that children in immersion education read more frequently in English for pleasure than they read in Irish and that they prefer to read in English (Harris et al., 2006; Parsons & Lyddy, 2016). There is also evidence that they are better readers of English than they are readers of Irish, including native Irish speakers (Lyddy et al., 2005; Pétarváry et al., 2014). Principals and teachers report a lack of willingness of children to read in Irish as well as a lack of competence in cases.

There is evidence that reading needs can be met more inclusively with focused, directed reading (LaSerna, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Wilson et al., 2012). However, teachers require particular expertise as well as advanced class management skills to confidently organise differentiated teaching and groups in class (Wilson et al., 2012).

This research focused on teacher practice. Assessment results, research articles and new reading resources were used to encourage a group of teachers to examine their current practices and explore possibilities for change and an inclusive approach to the teaching of reading. A focus on the senior classes can provide information on a range of skills and strategies that readers have, or have not, acquired while reading two languages. The research question addressed was: Can an inclusive approach to reading with targeted groups meet the needs of 9-11 year olds in immersion education settings in Ireland?

To explore this question, the major factors that affect literacy achievement and learning effectiveness for bilingual learners are discussed; variation in language proficiency, differentiation in practice, appropriate assessment, appropriate resources and the training and knowledge that teachers need to implement strategies and make changes in practice.

Diversity in competence

Bilinguals often have different competences in their languages (Montrul, 2008). The differences are due to a number of factors, such as one's cognitive abilities, contact with the language, the degree of socialisation, prior experience with language, the age of the learner (Montrul, 2008) as well as specific learning needs that influence linguistic development. It has been revealed in L2 reading that differences in knowledge of vocabulary and reading fluency

influenced differences in reading comprehension (Lee& Chen, 2018). It has also been revealed that students with below-average reading achievement had less proficiency in the language compared to students with above-average scores (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2021). Children have a mix of language competences, and in immersion schools, complexity is increased when needs must be met in both languages.

Differentiation in practice

In an inclusive approach, the goal of the Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018; Westwood, 2001) is to make the curriculum accessible to all children. Proactive differentiation is recommended when the same model does not work for everyone. Children can benefit from lessons more focused on their needs (Barnes, 2017; Nic Aindriú, 2024) and purposeful group practice in L2 reading can be more focused and personalised (LaSerna, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Wilson et al., 2012). Lack of time with each student is reported as a disadvantage with reading groups (Shanahan, 2013). However, children can be targeted in groups that are organised with specific goals in mind. Children are in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987) which allows them to develop at the appropriate level and close the gap in proficiency in L2 reading (La Serna, 2022). In groups, children have the opportunity to engage in active and collaborative activities that make learning social (Wilson et al., 2012).

Assessment

In the case of dual literacy, assessing each language separately without identifying the link between the two languages does not recognise the development of dual literacy (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2010; Hornberger, 2004; Nic Aindriú, 2021). Researchers have expressed concerns that children are being identified as bad readers due to a lack of understanding of dual literacy (Hopewell & Escamilla, 2014). It is necessary to identify all skills, strategies and multi-competences of dual literacy. Reading in the first language (L1), language proficiency of the second language (L2) and the decoding of the L2 contribute to the understanding of the L2, therefore assessment tests of merely one language do not reflect all competencies of multilingualism (Hopewell & Escamilla, 2014). Of course, there is no single assessment that provides all the information. Breaking the reading process into components is recommended as an approach to focus on the range of cognitive processes associated with reading across languages (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005; Stanovich, 2000). Teachers can informally create their own tests and assessment strategies using records, checklists, notes, dialogues, questioning and observation, focusing on phonological awareness, word recognition/phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). A reader can reveal the strategies they use to address challenges or can highlight the strategies that are lacking. With information from assessments, the teacher can be reflective and critical in finding the most effective teaching method (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020).

Resources

Attractive and stimulating resources are recognised as a source of positive attitudes in reading (Dunne & Hickey, 2017; Guthrie, 2013). A range of genres and types of books enhance the motivation of reading. There is evidence that exposure to books encourages greater participation in reading than the socio-economic status of a child (Cummins, 2011). A variety of books and a variety of language standards are needed to accommodate the approaches and contexts of reading in schools (Glasswell & Ford, 2010). Texts that are aimed at teacher-guided reading contain rich and challenging language. Other books can be in the reader's zone of proximal development that encourages the use of skills and strategies (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Reluctant readers can be supported with books that are written at a low level of ability but that focus on a high level of interest. Texts for independent reading or for reading clubs should be at an accessible language level that can be read for pleasure. Shanahan (2020) recognises the importance of texts being challenging for readers to strengthen reading skills. On the other hand, readers are less likely to understand a text if it contains too many new words (Snell et al., 2015; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012). It is therefore necessary for teachers to find challenging texts that are not at an overly challenging level that the children will be discouraged. This is a challenge for immersion and L2 teachers and guidance on book selection is necessary.

Teacher training and knowledge

Teacher expertise is a critical element in effective reading instruction (Gambrell et al., 2014). In the context of this study, to promote an inclusive approach in reading lessons, teachers need specific knowledge. Pedagogical knowledge is required to support teaching approaches, class organisation, whole class and group teaching as well as teaching routines (Griffith et al., 2015). In addition, there is a need for specific knowledge in the particular context of immersion education (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Nig Uidhir & Ó Ceallaigh, 2024) in terms of reading components across languages, assessment and appropriate resources suitable for specific languages. Appropriate assessment would provide an insight into the language proficiency of children, and with this information, an understanding of the ways in which differentiation can be applied in practice to support a range of learners.

Change of practice

Changing long-standing practice is challenging. A teacher may know there is a problem but not know how to solve it (Duguay et al., 2016) or believe that a particular practice is in place, but observation of the practice itself indicates that this is not the case (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). Research on dissonance focuses on changing beliefs and attitudes as a starting point towards change (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017). Reducing dissonance can raise self-awareness and support teachers to make their own changes in practice (Gorski, 2009). To focus on teacher practice, the inclusion of the voice of children in the form of assessment or classroom observation is recommended to examine teachers' current practice and place this in the context of theory (Treacy & Leavy, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on the practice of Gaelscoil teachers in Irish reading lessons for children aged 9-11, with the aim of reflecting on their inclusive practice by focusing on assessment, research articles and new reading resources. Teachers were given research articles on the components of reading (Dole, 2002; Lervåg & Aukrust, 2010; Pressley, 2001; Rasinski, 2014; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012) and on reading approaches (Grabe, 2010; Subscription & Pinnell, 2012). An Irish version of the assessment tests on the components of reading was developed and implemented in consultation with the teachers. Running records, a fluency test based on the Fluency Rubric (Rasinski, 2004), a decoding assessment based on the *Cód na Gaeilge* (Irish Language Code) programme (de Brún, 2012) and a phonics assessment (Walpole et al., 2011), word recognition (Liostaí Bhreacadh, 2007) and comprehension interviews based on the Major Point Interview for Readers (Keane & Zimmerman, 1997) were conducted. A new selection of reading resources were presented to the teachers who chose books suitable for the readers in their classes at a variety of reading abilities.

Teachers completed questionnaires at the beginning of the study to describe current practice. They were interviewed at the beginning and end of the study. A reading lesson was observed in each class and there were ongoing discussion sessions throughout the study.

Participants

Six teachers from two Irish immersion schools participated in the study. Ethical approval was gained from Dublin City University and approval from the boards of management of both schools and approval from all participants. A small sample of teachers was selected with the aim of gathering detailed information on practice. Urban schools were selected with large class sizes, a mix of socio-economic backgrounds and with children for whom Irish was not the language of home. The teachers had classes aged 9-11 with around 30 children in each class (n=172). It is recognised that this study is a small sample, but it provides an insight into the practice of reading and the teachers' views on their practice.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from the questionnaires, the children's assessment results, transcripts of the interviews, observations and discussion sessions. Quantitative data were analysed by recording frequencies. Thematic analysis (Clark & Braun, 2017) was applied to the qualitative data and common themes were revealed and are discussed below.

RESULTS

These findings discuss the responses and statements made by six teachers who took part in the study. The analysis of the questionnaires (n=6) and the children's assessment results (n=172) were used to inform the teachers' discussions. A thematic analysis was conducted on 12 interviews, 6 discussion sessions and 12 lesson observations. Major themes emerged from the analysis of the data; lack of training in the specific aspects of immersion education, lack of teacher knowledge, teacher attitudes and confidence, lack of assessments and lack of resources as well as lack of knowledge of resources.

Practice at the beginning of the study

All teachers reported that they had received monolingual training in reading in initial and in-service teacher education and had not received any training in inclusive approaches to reading. They had not read any research on these topics. This lack of knowledge on specific aspects of immersion education has been demonstrated in other studies in Ireland (Nig Uidhir & Ó Ceallaigh, 2023; Ó Duibhir et al., 2017).

All participating teachers stated that the children did not have the appropriate standard of reading in Irish. A wide

range of difficulties were described for children with regard to decoding skills, vocabulary development, fluency problems and some had a lack of comprehension of texts. However, teachers explained that their approach to assessing reading did not provide them with the appropriate information, that they did not know exactly where the weaknesses were and how to address them. The teachers in both schools indicated that they had more reading resources in English than in Irish. To cater for the wide range of readers in classes, a wide range of books is necessary. A shortage of high interest, low ability texts in Irish as appropriate resources in these contexts was discussed.

Description of lessons

A typical reading lesson was described. In one school lessons were mostly whole class reading lessons, the same book for each child, mostly fictional novels. The emphasis was on a teacher or students reading aloud in turn and everyone else following the text. The reading was stopped occasionally to explain words or for the children look up the definition in the dictionary. After the reading, the children were given activities, either independently or in groups. There was no differentiation, and although the children were working in groups, everyone had the same text and the same group work. In the other school, group reading took place for the most part, and each group had a different book according to the children's abilities. Each group had independently pre-planned activities based on the book while the teacher moved from group to group, listening to children read aloud in turn. The emphasis was on reading aloud in these lessons, each student reading in turn and reading as a display (Ash et al., 2008). This practice leaves less time for reading instruction and less time for each student (Ash et al., 2008; Shanahan, 2013). Each student read in turn in a Round Robin style. While there was an inclusive approach in terms of groups, there was no time for teaching reading and meeting the needs of each individual.

Change

The research, assessment results and new resources provided teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their own practice in the context of a new perspective. All teachers indicated in the final interviews that they had learned a great deal from the research articles, that they recognised their own heightened awareness and a change in their own effectiveness. The assessments provided them with detailed information that they did not have before and gave them clear targets for planning for the children's needs. The teachers indicated their own lack of knowledge of reading resources available in Irish. They were given a range of options, fiction and non-fiction texts as well as Readers' Theatre. The Readers' Theatre encouraged the use of group reading in classes that did not practice group reading, as well as reading aloud in the context of fluency practice and rereading, which improves prosody and comprehension (Chard et al., 2002; Rasinski, 2014). The teachers were afforded confidence in selecting appropriate books and trying new approaches. They believed they were employing an inclusive and enjoyable approach while focusing on the children's specific needs in Irish reading.

DISCUSSION

The teachers expressed their lack of knowledge about the development of reading components across two languages, informal assessment in an immersion setting, reading approaches and appropriate resources for a range of learners in an inclusive approach. In reading research articles and analysing assessment results the teachers explored their own practices. Small groups are recommended to meet the needs of children in the L2 (La Serna, 2022) but this is not sufficient without the appropriate information from assessment and research for planning (Wilson et al., 2012). Through informal assessment it is possible to focus on the aspects that are weak or lacking in readers in focused groups (La Serna, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Wilson et al., 2012) and to be reflective and critical in order to find the most effective teaching method in an inclusive pedagogy (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). The teachers were given the opportunity to focus on the needs of the children at their own immersion language proficiency level (LaSerna, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Wilson et al., 2012).

The importance of resources and books appropriate to the child's level of learning and the need to properly investigate the books being read was highlighted. Irish language reading resources have been greatly expanded recently, but there are gaps in resources for specific reading situations. There is a shortage for a range of contexts and reading approaches to meet all needs. High interest, low ability texts were highlighted as a gap in the context of struggling or reluctant readers.

Teacher knowledge and reflection on practice are essential to planning (Duguayet al., 2016). It is also necessary to have the appropriate resources for planning and responding to children's needs in an inclusive manner (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). This study showed that teachers can be motivated and encouraged to make positive changes in their own practices (Gorski, 2009; Treacy & Leavy, 2021).

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