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How do they read? Findings from teachers and principals on the teaching and learning of reading in Irish in immersion settings in two jurisdictions

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Abstract

In immersion settings, children are immersed in a language that may not be their home language. Bilingualism, speaking in two languages, and biliteracy, reading and writing in two languages, are goals of immersion education. This study investigates the teaching and learning of reading in Irish, a minority language, and includes immersion primary schools in the two jurisdictions in Ireland. The study focuses on pupils in the higher classes in primary schools, when reading in two languages has been established, to investigate how they read in Irish. Findings from questionnaires inform a description of teaching and learning of reading in Irish. Differences and similarities across the jurisdictions are evident. Hornberger's [(1989) 'Continua of biliteracy'. *Review of Educational Research* 59 (3): 271–296. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543059003271>] and Hornberger's [(2003) *Continua of biliteracy: An ecological framework for educational policy, research, and practice in multilingual settings* (Vol. 41)]. *Multilingual Matters* continua of biliteracy is used as a theoretical framework to highlight and explain current practice and disclose areas of power imbalances between majority and minority language instruction.

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Introduction

An aim of immersion education is to achieve bilingualism, where pupils speak two languages, and biliteracy, where pupils read and write in two languages. Reading two or more languages involves a different learning trajectory than monolingual reading (Reyes 2012) and reading may develop in different paths in different languages (Koda 2005). It is also acknowledged that having more than one language may imply varying degrees of knowledge of language, and languages may be unevenly developed (García, Bartlett, and Kleifgen 2008). In the case of a minority language, this may be due to an imbalance of power in favour of the majority language (Hornberger 2004). In second

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language learning, reading is viewed as an important element in the language acquisition process to improve oral skills and overall language acquisition (August and Shanahan 2006; Stenson and Hickey 2018). Wide reading improves L2 reading comprehension (Birch 2015) and success in L2 reading creates a positive attitude to reading (Dunne and Hickey 2017; Yamashita 2013). Books provide access to language that may not be available in the home or the community, particularly in the case of a minority language (Stenson and Hickey 2018). To achieve balanced biliteracy, reading in both languages needs to be practised (Hornberger 2004). Indeed, some reading skills have been found to transfer across languages and pedagogical strategies can be adapted to facilitate transfer (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012; Pasquarella et al. 2014).

This study focuses on the immersion model in Ireland and includes both jurisdictions. Immersion education is a form of bilingual education where pupils are fully immersed in a language, often an L2 for the pupils. In immersion settings in Ireland, the majority of pupils do not speak Irish at home. Irish is viewed as the first language (L1) of the school but is a second language (L2) for the majority of the pupils. The immersion model in the majority of schools in Ireland is one-way early total immersion, where children are immersed totally in Irish in the first years of school. There is a dearth of research in the Irish context to indicate how best to promote biliteracy, and little detailed evidence of reading practices in immersion schools in Ireland, how resources are used and how readers develop and apply their taught strategies to read in Irish.

To investigate these topics, the current study focuses on 9- to 11-year-old pupils' reading in Irish in immersion settings when reading skills have been established in both Irish and English. Information is gathered from teachers and principals from both jurisdictions. This context has influenced the formation of the research questions:

1. What are the current pedagogies for 9-to 11-year-old immersion pupils in Irish reading lessons as reported by teachers and principals?
2. How are teachers prepared to teach Irish reading to 9-to 11-year-old immersion pupils?
3. What reading resources are used nationally for 9-to-11-year-old immersion pupils in Irish reading lessons, as reported by teachers and principals?

The article begins with a description of Hornberger's Continua of Biliteracy (CoBi) (2003, 2022) as a framework. This is followed by a summary of the context of the study, an outline of current policy and practice, approaches to teacher preparation and the relevance of resource provision in the Irish context. The methodology describes a survey as a method of gathering information from a large group. Results are then presented in the form of tables, graphs and descriptions, and the discussion section places the results in the context of CoBi (Hornberger 2004). This study provides a baseline for further research.

A framework for reading in two or more languages

Implementing an effective model of biliteracy in schools is problematic, often in relation to pedagogy and lack of resources, but mainly due to unequal power relations (Schwinge 2017). CoBi (Hornberger 2003) is intended as a framework and a heuristic for research,

teaching and language planning in linguistically diverse settings. It is a tool for bilingual educators to approach biliteracy with a sociocultural awareness and reflection. The framework defines the contexts, media, content and development in biliteracy. The complex interrelationships between bilingualism and literacy are evident in [Figure 1](#), highlighting the nested relationship of the continuum where points are not static or discrete. The intersecting nature of each continua captures the complexity of biliteracy and highlights the need for a fluid and dynamic continua of language and literacy use.

A revisit to CoBi (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000) describes the implicit privileging of one end of the continua over the other, and the traditionally more powerful and traditionally less powerful aspects of CoBi highlight the emphasis of power on majority languages and monolingualism ([Figure 2](#)).

The CoBi aims to balance the progression in biliteracy across all languages by encouraging educators to include all aspects of the continua. It is claimed that when learning contexts allow learners to draw on all points of the CoBi, their chances for full biliterate development are greater (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000). Studies have revealed that spending instructional time in two languages has no adverse effects on pupils' academic development in the majority language (Dickson et al. 2021). In the Irish context, English is much more powerful than Irish, with more support structures for pedagogies, teacher preparation, and resources for the teaching and learning of reading. CoBi is designed to facilitate a range of bilingual and plurilingual settings. It encourages a reflective approach to consider all areas of the continua,

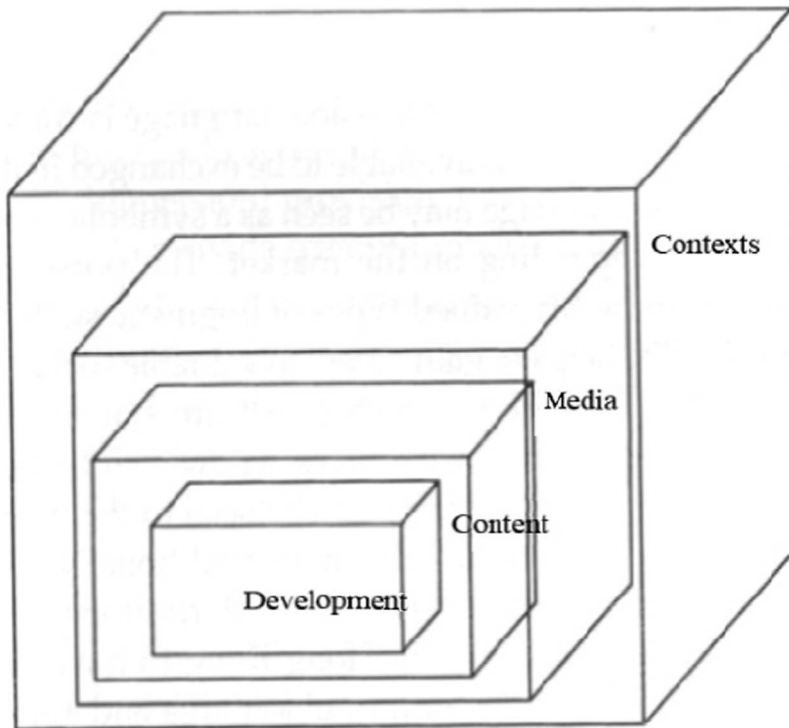


Figure 1. Hornberger's Biliteracy Framework (2004).

Traditionally <i>less</i> powerful		Traditionally <i>more</i> powerful
<i>Contexts of biliteracy</i>		
Micro	↔	Macro
Oral	↔	Literate
Bi(multi)lingual	↔	Monolingual
<i>Media of biliteracy</i>		
Simultaneous exposure	↔	Successive exposure
Dissimilar structures	↔	Similar structures
Divergent scripts	↔	Convergent scripts
<i>Content of biliteracy</i>		
Minority	↔	Majority
Vernacular	↔	Literary
Contextualized	↔	Decontextualized
<i>Development of biliteracy</i>		
Reception	↔	Production
Oral	↔	Written
L1	↔	L2

Figure 2. Continua of Biliteracy (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000).

especially the aspects traditionally considered less powerful. In Ireland, learners have a multitude of backgrounds in learning Irish and other languages and different emphases on reception and production, oral and literate; simultaneous and successive exposure may be required. In the current study pedagogies, teacher preparation and resources are investigated in the context of CoBi and demonstrate how a focus on all areas of the CoBi in the Irish context could help redress the imbalance.

Context of the study

The historical context in Ireland has led to two jurisdictions with two education systems on the island. The Irish language has a markedly different status in each jurisdiction. Irish is a minority language in both jurisdictions. In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), while Irish is the first official language, English is the home language of the majority of the population. In Northern Ireland (NI), an Irish language act was introduced as recently as 2022. There have long been language acts for Welsh in Wales and Scots Gaelic in Scotland as well as language legislation in the RoI. Prior to this, Northern Ireland was the only jurisdiction on these islands with no protection for the indigenous language (Mercator 2019). The societal power dynamic is evident and both jurisdictions, particularly NI, struggle for support and resources for immersion schools. The publication of the Policy for Irish-Medium Education Outside the Gaeltacht (Department of Education and Youth 2025) is an indication of potential change in RoI and suggests the possibility of more support structures. A new curriculum is forthcoming in NI, but it is not yet known how Irish immersion schools will be facilitated. Immersion schools in both jurisdictions share research, pedagogy and resources. There are 188 primary schools, 31 post-primary schools and 17 Irish-medium units within English-medium schools in Ireland (Gaeloideachas 2023). Of the 188 primary schools, 153 are in the RoI and 35 in NI.

Education in each jurisdiction is different with regard to the Irish language. Currently in the RoI, Irish is acquired in schools mainly in three different settings: where Irish is taught for 30-40 min a day as a subject in an English-medium school; in an immersion school, where pupils are fully immersed in Irish in the early years, and English is introduced as a subject in subsequent years; or in *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking areas) schools that include a greater number of pupils for whom Irish is the home language. In NI, immersion is the only model employed at primary and post-primary levels, and Irish is not a requirement in English-medium primary schools. Irish can be learned as a chosen language in an English-medium post-primary setting. There are no *Gaeltacht* areas in NI. The difference in the education of Irish across the two jurisdictions has resulted in different levels of fluency in Irish among adults, with 40.4% of adults in the RoI reporting a basic fluency (Central Statistics Office 2023) and 12.5% in NI (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2022). This has implications for home support with reading in Irish for pupils in immersion schools.

Reading pedagogies in an immersion setting in Ireland

Most immersion schools in Ireland begin reading in English in the second year, age 6, in the RoI (50.5%) and in the third year, age 7, in NI (68%) (Ó Duibhir et al. 2017). Although 21% of schools in NI report beginning English in the fourth year, age 8, of school. While introducing languages successively is viewed as traditionally more powerful in the CoBi, it is based on a majority language first principle (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000). The rationale for beginning reading in Irish first is to maximise early exposure and motivation given the minority language status. Also, a later start to formal reading in English affords more time to focus on Irish reading. This approach is reflected in current curricular guidelines in the RoI (NCCA 2019) and in NI (CCEA 2009).

When English is introduced, it amounts to approximately 14% of the school day (Ó Duibhir 2018), usually in English lessons only, and this continues throughout the primary classes. Despite the longer exposure to reading in Irish, pupils reportedly read better and more often in English (Péterváry et al. 2014) and are more positive about reading in English (Dunne and Hickey 2017; Harris et al. 2006). In assessments of English attainment in schools in the RoI, pupils in Irish-medium schools scored higher in reading than those in English-medium schools (Shiel et al. 2011). This is quite an achievement given that Irish is used for most of the instruction. No such information is available for reading in English in schools in NI or for reading in Irish in either jurisdiction, or whether simultaneous or successive exposure is effective for reading in Irish.

Teacher preparation for immersion teaching in Ireland

Initial teacher education and professional development are important for successful immersion programmes in which teachers require essential linguistic and cultural competencies as well as specific pedagogical practices (Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh 2023). Research has highlighted that the definitive needs of teachers in immersion contexts were not being met by pre- and in-service provision (Ó Duibhir 2018). In NI, current

guidelines from the General Teaching Council (GTCNI 2007) are generic and not specific to immersion schools. New guidelines are forthcoming. There have been recent developments that have the potential to better prepare teachers for biliteracy. In RoI, the Policy for Irish-medium Education outside of the Gaeltacht (Department of Education and Youth 2025) has the potential to generate such guidelines and further research and resources. Core Competencies in all-Irish Education (Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh 2024) is a tool for schools and teachers to identify core competencies in their knowledge and identify their individual requirements. The specific knowledge required for the teaching of reading is a small aspect of the listed core competencies but offers the potential for expansion.

Reading resources in immersion settings in Ireland

For the majority of children, school offers the only opportunity to read in Irish. Research reveals that children choose English rather than Irish books to read for pleasure (Dunne and Hickey 2017; Harris et al. 2006), and that even *Gaeltacht* children have better literacy skills in English than in Irish (Péterváry et al. 2014). The political, socio-economic and sociocultural status of a language impacts learning and power relations (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000). Power relations in schools, communities and related institutions can result in difficulties with pedagogy or lack of resources for minority languages (Baker 2011; Schwinge 2017). To motivate children to read in a minority language they should have access to a wide range of materials, comparable to those available in the majority language. Given the small market, a focused provision that highlights gaps in provision is essential.

A lack of definitive and appropriate assessments results in a lack of information about specific areas of reading development in two languages (Baker 2011). In Ireland, many assessment tools available for English are not available for Irish (Barnes 2017; Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir, and Travers 2021; Parsons and Lyddy 2016), reflecting the imbalance of support provided for the minority language (Hornberger 2004). Standardised tests in Irish are outdated and are currently being revised (Educational Research Centre 2025). Assessments often use monolinguals as the norm, but the development of bilingual children is different from that of their monolingual peers and specific skills need to be acknowledged (Bialystok, Peets, and Moreno 2014). Assessing two languages separately and not considering each language in conjunction with the other results in not recognising the learning trajectory in biliteracy (Escamilla and Hopewell 2010; Hornberger 2004; Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir, and Travers 2021).

Materials and methods

Given the lack of information on immersion practices in the teaching and learning of reading in Irish, a survey design methodology was adopted to gather a wide range of information from a large group. Data were gathered from questionnaire responses with the aim of profiling a population (Rowley 2014). Approval was gained from the university's Research Ethics Committee. The questionnaire elicited quantitative data from closed questions as well as qualitative data from themes developed from open questions. Online questionnaires were designed, with a hard copy option for choice. Questionnaires

Table 1. Description of questionnaires outlining differences.

	Teacher questionnaire RoI	Teacher questionnaire NI	Principal. questionnaire RoI	Principal. questionnaire NI
No. of questions	50	50	37	37
Closed questions	48	48	36	36
Open questions	2	2	1	1
Class labels	Junior infants Senior infants 1st class (R1*) 2nd class (R2) 3rd class (R3) 4th class (R4) 5th class (R5) 6th class (R6)	Primary 1 (R1) Primary 2 (R2) Primary 3 (R3) Primary 4 (R4) Primary 5 (R5) Primary 6 (R6) Primary 7 (R7)	Junior infants Senior infants 1st class (R1*) 2nd class (R2) 3rd class (R3) 4th class (R4) 5th class (R5) 6th class (R6)	Primary 1 (R1) Primary 2 (R2) Primary 3 (R3) Primary 4 (R4) Primary 5 (R5) Primary 6 (R6) Primary 7 (R7)
Years spent in primary school	8	7	8	7
Socio-economic status	DEIS	Free school meals	DEIS	Free school meals
Teaching qualifications	Postgraduate Masters in Education (PME)	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	Postgraduate Masters in Education (PME)	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
Linguistic differences	Eclipse of initial vowel after 'ar an' structure	Aspiration of initial vowel after 'ar an' structure	Eclipse of initial vowel after 'ar an' structure	Aspiration of initial vowel after 'ar an' structure

*R1 is an abbreviation of Rang 1 meaning Class 1

were in Irish. Questionnaires were modified for schools in each jurisdiction, reflecting differences in curricular, linguistic and jurisdictional issues (Table 1). In the 17 Irish-medium units in English-medium schools, questionnaires were directed at the unit co-ordinator rather than the school principal. Two questionnaires were sent to each school, one aimed at principals to gather a general profile of the school, and one aimed at a teacher from each school representing the relevant age-group. A standardised form of Irish for each jurisdiction was also used. In the context of CoBi (Hornberger 2003), the questionnaire aimed to give voice to the immersion sector, principals and teachers, to describe current practice, establish the power dynamic, and provide information for planning, provision, and further research. Every attempt was made to ensure reliability and validity. Questionnaires were piloted for question variation, meaning, respondent interest, order and timing with 2 former school principals and 2 former teachers, one from each jurisdiction. Participation was voluntary, and individual consent was given by each respondent. Online questionnaires were sent to all schools for which e-mail addresses were available, one to principals ($n = 174$), 138 in the RoI and 35 in NI and the other to be forwarded to representative teachers ($n = 174$), 138 in the RoI and 35 in NI.

Participant profiles

As noted, there are marked differences in approaches to the Irish language in the RoI and NI. Differences in the education systems include different curricula, class labelling, support policy titles and some terminology. However, the aims and approaches of immersion education remain the same. Versions for the jurisdictions had the same number of questions and relevant terminology; references to curricula, policy and classes were standardised in corresponding questions. Resources were listed to allow

for choice. The focus was on current practice and curricula and policy were not referenced. There were some linguistic differences with questionnaires for each jurisdiction written in the standard of Irish used in each jurisdiction. Each of the groups was given the same questions, and the same coding system was used. Differences in the questionnaires for each jurisdiction are outlined in [Table 1](#).

Principal questionnaires

The questionnaire for principals consisted of 37 questions and was used to gather a general profile of schools. It was divided into seven sections. Questions were multiple-choice in Likert-type form. The sections on school, principal, staff, and children aimed to gather general information on numbers of pupils, teachers, support teachers, class sizes, school growth, and participant qualifications. The sections on SEN, reading, and planning asked for general information on teaching practices in Irish reading, resources, and teacher participation in planning. All questions were closed, except the final question, where principals were invited to add further information they thought pertinent.

Teacher questionnaires

Target teacher representatives were teaching 9-11-year-olds. The teacher questionnaire consisted of 50 questions, 48 of which were closed questions. There were seven sections and two final open questions for more elaborate answers. Sections included experience, qualifications, previous teacher education, information about children and their current reading practices, the teaching of reading and methodologies, time spent, typical focus of lessons, assessment, resources and planning. The multiple-choice Likert-type form of questioning offered a quick method for answering questions.

Analysis of data

All questionnaires were completed online. The resulting four sets of questionnaires, from principals and teachers in each jurisdiction, were gathered and analysed separately. All responses to the closed questions on the questionnaire were transferred to Excel (2024) sheets for analysis. Responses to the open questions were listed, divided into themes and analysed according to frequency. Analysis of open questions aimed to highlight priorities and any other information added by teachers and principals.

Results

Completed questionnaires were returned by 64 teachers and 75 principals. Response rates for questionnaires tend to be low (Rowley 2014). Lee and Lings (2008) suggest a mail survey in the UK tends to get a response rate of between 15% and 30%. Rowley (2014) suggests 20% can be regarded as a good rate. In this context, the return rate for the current study was very positive (see [Figure 3](#)). To maintain anonymity, respondents used their school roll numbers as designated by the relevant Department of Education.

Results are divided into three main sections: pedagogy, teacher preparation and resources, reflecting the research questions. Analysis of the quantitative data is discussed

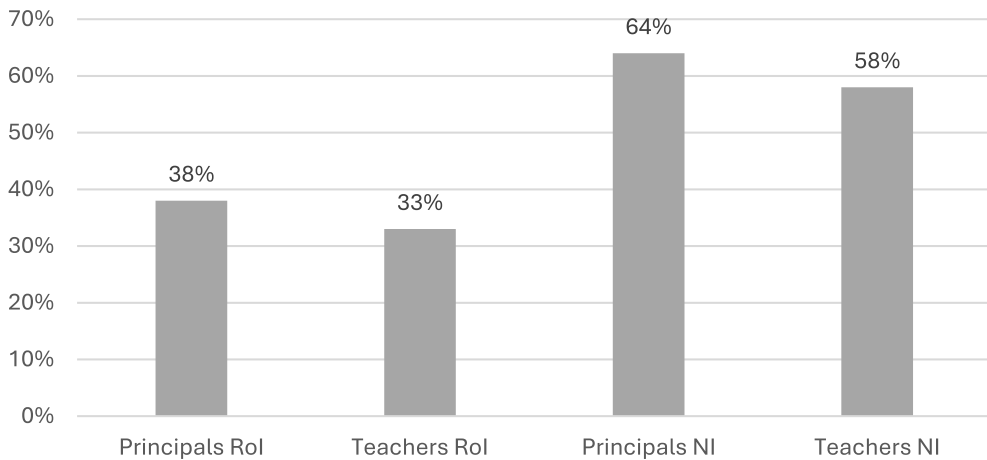


Figure 3. Response rate of principals and teachers to questionnaires.

below, supported by tables and graphs, while themes that emerged from the open questions are outlined in the final section.

Pedagogy

Information about pedagogy was divided into themes, including when children begin reading in Irish and in English, what criteria teachers use for planning their teaching, teacher descriptions of lessons, as well as perceived pupils' attitudes to reading.

Beginning formal reading in Irish and English

By the age of nine (5th year in school), children in immersion schools in Ireland are reading, or learning to read, in both Irish and English. The sequence in which reading in each language is formally introduced has not been found to be critical to later L1 or English reading ability (Parsons and Lyddy 2016). However, when children begin to read formally in each language could reveal some information about the school, about reading in the immersion language, about how reading is valued, and about how schools maximise the transfer of skills. Principals were asked when pupils in their schools begin formal reading in Irish and in English. Formal reading in this case is when children read individual texts and follow a reading programme or a school-designed reading plan. A considerable number of principals indicated delaying formal reading in Irish to the second or third term of year 1 in school and some in the RoI until year 2. Year groups in Figure 4 signify years spent in school.

When pupils in immersion settings in Ireland should begin to read in English has been a topic of interest in previous studies (Ó Duibhir et al. 2017; Parsons and Lyddy 2009, 2016). In the current study, findings revealed a later start to English reading in NI, with 13% reporting beginning reading in the fourth year. Figure 5 reveals a clear distinction between starting times for beginning reading in English across the two jurisdictions, and a small number of schools in the RoI are introducing both languages simultaneously.

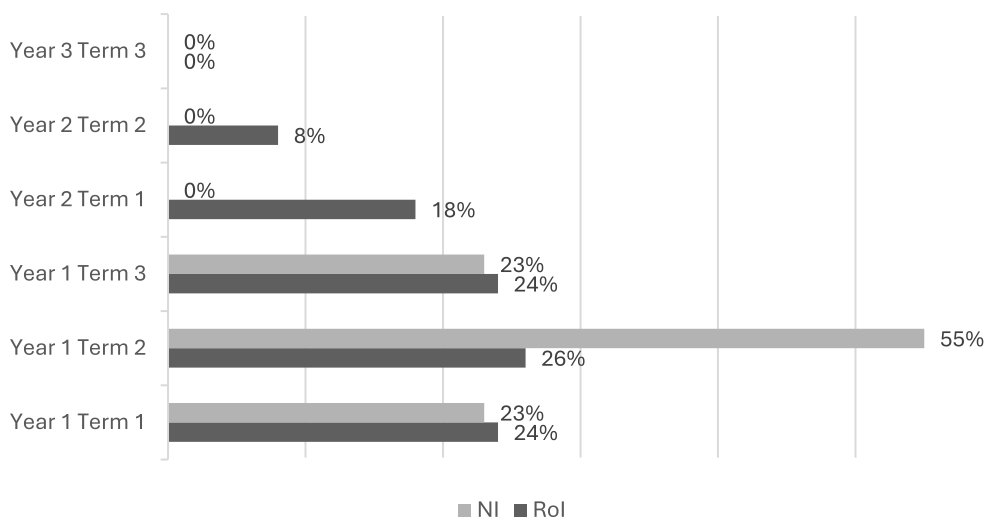


Figure 4. When children begin formal reading in Irish.

Planning for the teaching of reading as reported by principals and teachers

The majority of principals reported having a development plan for reading in both Irish and English and that the relevant teachers were involved in this planning. A higher percentage of teachers in NI reported having a whole school plan (84.2%) than in the RoI (57.8%). All teachers gave a positive response to planning. They were asked what criteria they used in their planning of reading in Irish, presented in Table 2 roughly from highest to lowest responses.

Results were fairly similar in both jurisdictions. Assessment, both formal and informal, and available resources are evidently the highest criteria used by teachers to inform their planning of the teaching of reading in Irish.

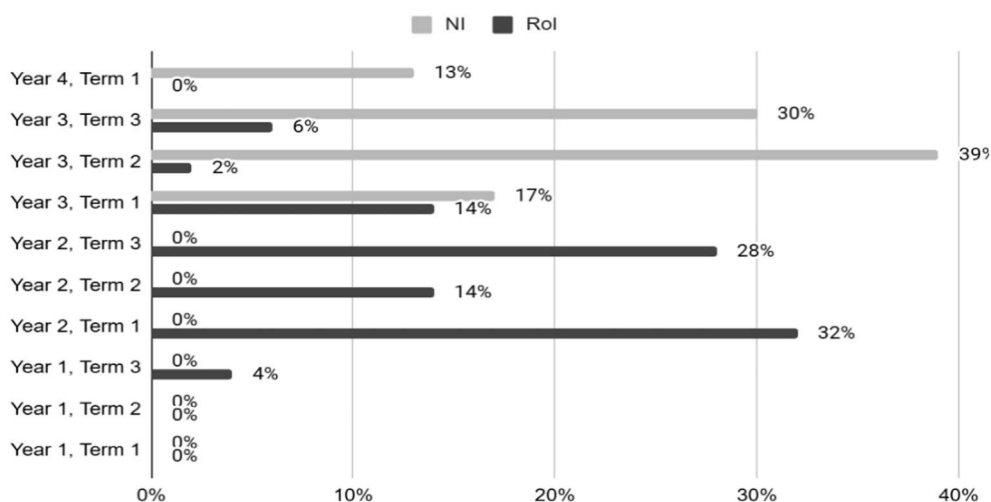


Figure 5. When children begin formal reading in English.

Table 2. Information used by teachers to plan for the teaching of reading.

	RoI Irish	English	NI Irish	English
Assessment	89%	87%	86%	86%
Available resources	78%	78%	76%	76%
Curriculum learning outcomes	67%	69%	76%	76%
Children's interests	62%	69%	52%	63%
Policy guidelines	62%	58%	38%	38%
Feedback from inspectors	42%	38%	29%	29%
Co-operation with SEN teacher	33%	33%	24%	24%
End of year goals	29%	31%	52%	52%
Children's linguistic backgrounds	24%	20%	29%	29%
Current research	24%	27%	24%	24%
Input from parents	20%	18%	14%	10%

Reading lessons as reported by teachers

Teachers were asked how often they taught reading in Irish and English and to describe their reading lessons, practices and contexts. More teachers in the RoI (51%) teach both Irish and English every day than in NI (33%). More teachers in NI (61%) teach Irish and English reading on alternate days than in the RoI (35%). The majority of teachers in both jurisdictions reported teaching reading in Irish and English around 2–3 h a week each. Table 3 provides details on reading instruction in Irish in order of most frequent daily occurrences.

Again, results were similar in both jurisdictions with differences in frequency of contexts. A major difference across the jurisdictions was in response to a question about having reading groups, with NI having consistently more group reading sessions, with a lower number in the RoI, 33% for Irish and 49% for English, as compared with NI, with 90% for both Irish and English reading. This suggests a difference in approach to the teaching of reading in the RoI and NI. It also suggests a different approach to reading in Irish and English in the RoI, reflecting an imbalance of approaches for majority and minority languages.

Teachers were asked to note the frequency of lessons involving reading skills and strategies. Skills taught are presented in Table 4 and the percentages of teachers reporting the frequency of lessons in Irish and English in each jurisdiction are indicated roughly in order of highest frequencies.

Table 3. Reading programme for Irish.

Context	Daily		2/3 times a week		1/2 times a month		1/2 times a term		Seldom	
	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI
Discussion from reading	33%	43%	53%	48%	7%	5%	0	0	0	0
Leisure reading (pupil choice)	37%	24%	40%	48%	36%	19%	2%	0	9%	5%
Class reading for discussion	31%	29%	56%	52%	9%	14%	2%	0	0	0
Teacher reading aloud quality texts for enjoyment	22%	19%	38%	57%	27%	19%	7%	10%	2%	0
Group reading, same text	16%	24%	51%	67%	9%	7%	9%	0	0	0
Writing lesson from reading	16%	5%	67%	33%	13%	38%	0	14%	0	5%
Lessons – levelled texts	11%	0	27%	38%	24%	24%	13%	19%	20%	5%
Lessons – class novel	9%	0	53%	43%	16%	43%	13%	10%	2%	0
Leisure reading (teacher choice)	0	0	20%	29%	31%	33%	16%	10%	27%	14%

Table 4. Frequency of skills instruction in Irish and English reading lessons.

	Skill	Daily		2–3 times a week		1–2 times a month		1–2 times a term		Rarely	
		Ir	Eng	Ir	Eng	Ir	Eng	Ir	Eng	Ir	Eng
RoI	Phonics/Decoding	20%	16%	47%	42%	29%	27%	0	2%	0	0
NI	Phonics/Decoding	52%	38%	38%	52%	0	0	0	0	0	0
RoI	Reading fluency	44%	38%	40%	47%	13%	11%	0	0	0	0
NI	Reading fluency	24%	14%	71%	71%	0	5%	0	0	0	0
RoI	Vocabulary/phrases	40%	29%	44%	64%	9%	4%	0	0	0	0
NI	Vocabulary/phrases	24%	14%	48%	48%	24%	24%	0	0	0	0
RoI	Grammar	27%	18%	58%	58%	13%	20%	0	0	0	0
NI	Grammar	10%	5%	76%	76%	10%	10%	0	0	0	0
RoI	Punctuation	22%	24%	42%	44%	33%	24%	2%	0	0	0
NI	Punctuation	14%	14%	52%	52%	24%	24%	0	0	0	0
RoI	Text structures	9%	9%	51%	44%	38%	40%	2%	2%	0	0
NI	Text structures	0	5%	43%	43%	48%	48%	0	0	0	0

The highest instances of the teaching of a skill are noted as occurring 2–3 times a week in NI in lessons on reading fluency and grammar in both Irish and English. Decoding is reportedly taught daily in Irish by 52% of teachers in NI in comparison to 20% in the RoI. Principals in RoI and in NI differed in responses regarding the use of a phonics programme in their schools. More than half of principals in the RoI (61.5%) claimed their schools use a phonics programme in the first two years, while all principals in NI (100%) described using a phonics programme in the first two years. In descriptions of phonics resource use in the higher primary classes this dropped to the most common phonics programme being used by 17.5% of schools in the RoI and to 96% in NI. A phonics programme for Irish was introduced in NI in 2009 and, given the lower number of Irish-medium schools in NI, CPD was provided for all schools. This approach has proven more difficult in RoI. All respondents reported teaching the same reading comprehension strategy instruction as frequently in Irish as in English.

Pupil attitudes towards reading as reported by teachers

Teachers were asked to report on their perceptions of children's attitudes to reading and reading practices in both Irish and English. With regard to reading in Irish, 53% of teachers in the RoI and 57% in NI reported that almost all children have a positive attitude. This contrasts with 87% of teachers in the RoI and 90% in NI reporting that almost all children have a positive attitude to reading in English. In the RoI, teachers reported that 78% of children read for leisure in English while 9% read in Irish. In NI, 48% of teachers reported that children read for leisure in English while a stark 0% were reported to read in Irish. Given that frequent reading is known to be a factor of good reading practice (Duke and Block 2012), this could have implications for children's reading achievements in Irish.

Teacher preparation

A Bachelor of Education (BEd) with a focus on Irish-medium education is offered in both jurisdictions at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, and at St. Mary's University

College, Belfast (Dunne 2025). A focus on Irish-medium education at the postgraduate level is also available as a two-year Postgraduate Master’s in Education (PME) in the RoI and a one-year postgraduate in education in NI (Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh 2023). Respondent principals and teachers outlined their qualifications (Table 5), describing whether their qualifications had an Irish-medium or English-medium education focus.

In both jurisdictions in Ireland, teacher education can take place over a four-year BEd or, alternatively, as a postgraduate course following a degree in an area other than education. In the RoI, 77% of principals reported having completed a BEd, while 79% of principals in NI reported having completed a one-year postgraduate course in education. In the RoI, slightly more teachers have completed a BEd than have completed a postgraduate course (57%), while in NI significantly more teachers have completed a one-year postgraduate course (70%). There is no empirical evidence to state that a three-to-four-year Bachelor of Education produces better teachers than a one- to two-year postgraduate course. However, initial teacher education is a critical variable in effective reading instruction (Gambrell et al. 2014) and a major influence on how beginning teachers teach reading (Clark, Helfrich, and Hatch 2017). Well-prepared teachers have the potential to influence reading achievement in schools (Darling-Hammond 2006).

Professional development (PD) is a way of ensuring teachers are regularly updated and informed about the latest research and best practice. In the questionnaires, teachers were asked to describe their experiences of PD. Responses from both jurisdictions revealed a lack of PD specific to immersion settings and specific to reading. All who responded that they had PD described a one-off session, much of which was related to the Primary Language Curriculum in the RoI. Most of the professional development described was aimed at teaching in English. Teacher competencies for practice in immersion settings are critical, and the teaching of reading requires specific and essential knowledge.

Resources

All teachers, both in the RoI and in NI, reported having access to more texts in English than in Irish. Most schools reported access to a school library, both in the RoI (81%) and NI (74%). High percentages reported having a class library in the RoI (91%) and NI (86%). However, descriptions of the available books in Irish in the library were not favourable with low percentages in the RoI (11%) and NI (5%) describing the books that were available to them at the time as excellent and somewhat higher in the RoI (29%) and NI (10%) describing them as very good. A significant number of schools in NI (74%) reported the use of the Accelerated Reading (AR) programme in English.

Table 5. Principals’ and teachers’ initial teacher education as reported in questionnaires.

	Bed (Irish)	Bed (Eng)	Postgraduate (Irish)	Postgraduate (Eng)	Other
Principals RoI	3.9%	72.5%	10%	8%	14%
Principals NI	17%	9%	56.5%	22%	4%
Teachers RoI	18%	39%	5%	41%	4.5%
Teachers NI	30%	0	45%	25%	5%

The purchase of AR for a school involves an investment in a large range of texts. Given that the AR is only used for English reading, this has resulted in school libraries having many texts in English and significantly fewer in Irish. For reading in Irish, teachers in the RoI (96%) and in NI (90%) reported the use of novels in their classrooms. More teachers in NI (81%) reported the use of a range of genres and informational texts in Irish than teachers in the RoI (60%). In relation to currently available reading resources in Irish, teachers rated their opinions of resources for specific purposes as evident in Table 6.

A high percentage of teachers in the RoI (93%) found resources for whole class reading very good or adequate, less so in NI (52%). There is less positivity for resources for small groups and leisure reading and a definite negative response to resources in a range of genres and for specific learning needs. This indicates little change from previous research that found a lack of a range of reading resources in schools and a lack of genres of literature (Harris et al. 2006).

Teachers in both jurisdictions reported using a range of assessment methods for reading in Irish. Methods of assessment were listed, and teachers were required to tick boxes according to frequency of use. The list included observation, written anecdotal notes, published checklists, running records, curriculum profiles, rating scales, portfolios, standardised tests, diagnostic tests and screening instruments. In many cases teachers gave the same information for English and Irish reading.

The level of support and resources for reading in a school may influence the teaching and learning of reading in schools as well as the motivation to read. In the RoI, 17% of schools reported having a programme to support Irish reading, mainly in the form of reading clubs. In NI, 39% of schools reported the same. The same question was asked regarding English reading, and schools in the RoI (47%) and in NI (83%) reported having such a programme. School principals in the RoI reported having an average of 3.4 additional special needs teachers on their staff, while 0.4 was the average in NI. Respondent teachers described support for pupils with additional needs, with 84% in NI and 50% in the RoI describing available support for both Irish and English reading.

Socio-economic status is known to affect support for education at home. The RoI policy Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (Department of Education and Youth 2020) supports schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils. Socio-economically disadvantaged children in NI are categorised according to the allocation of free school meals. Of the principals who returned questionnaires in the RoI, 5.9% indicated their school was a DEIS school. Participant schools in NI reported an average of 44% of pupils receiving free school meals with the highest reported as 82% and the lowest as 25%. Current statistics state that an average of 24% of pupils in NI receive free school meals (Department of Education, NI 2025). These figures would suggest a

Table 6. Teachers' rating of resources in their school for Irish reading.

Texts available	Very good		Adequate		Not suitable		Not available	
	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI
for whole class reading	42%	19%	51%	33%	7%	33%	0	5%
needs of small groups	20%	29%	38%	11%	33%	10%	7%	0
for leisure reading	13%	10%	49%	29%	38%	52%	2%	0
wide range of genres	7%	10%	47%	24%	33%	52%	9%	0
specific learning needs	2%	10%	47%	14%	31%	48%	18%	19%

large socio-economic gap between the Irish immersion schools in RoI and NI that returned questionnaires.

Open question themes

Around half the teachers responded to the open questions while 17 principals in the RoI and 11 in NI responded. All responses were transcribed and listed for qualitative survey analysis. A thematic analysis method was used with small q qualitative research that ensures objectivity, reliability and accuracy of coding (Braun and Clarke 2023). Responses were tallied and the most frequent responses emerged as themes. Three common themes emerged in both sets of responses. These were resources, boosting knowledge about teaching reading and human assistance. Sample quotes illustrating the dominant themes from the teacher questionnaires (QT3, QT5, QT6) and the principal questionnaires (QP1, QP3) are cited below.

Resources	'Resources, books, games specifically for Irish' (QT, T3) 'Resources specifically for children with difficulties and reading in L2' (QP, P1)
Boosting knowledge	'We are only in our second year with early immersion and these questions have been difficult to answer' (QT, T5) 'We need PD in Irish reading' (QP, Q1)
Human assistance	'Classroom assistants for reading lessons' (QT, T6) 'External services are slow to assist as a result of lack of standardised tests. We would like a raising of awareness about immersion among support services' (QP, P3)

As well as the examples above, resources included finance for resources, levelled texts, a lack of suitable resources for the higher classes, a range of genres, assessment tools, and an Irish version of Accelerated Reader. With regard to knowledge, teachers requested specific PD, opportunities to share best practice with other more experienced teachers as well as knowledge about time management and a differentiated approach to reading. Guidance in teaching comprehension strategies and book levels was a specific request in both jurisdictions. Human assistance also included classroom assistants for reading. Common themes were evident across both jurisdictions, and principals in both jurisdictions noted the lack of external support for immersion schools. Concerns about immersion approaches were noted in responses from principals in the RoI only. Immersion education is well established in NI, while recent changes in the curriculum in the RoI advocate an immersion approach that is new to some schools. Questionnaires were not analysed for representation beyond jurisdiction differences. There is scope for further research to ascertain the needs of specific schools based on the situation and community.

Limitations, ethics, reliability, and validity

It is recognised that only a proportion of teachers and principals responded to the questionnaires, and conclusions cannot be drawn about the whole sector based on this information. Some issues raised in the questionnaires, such as the closed responses in the quantitative sections as well as issues discussed in the qualitative analysis of responses require more information and a follow-up could reveal more detailed information. Examples such as using the same assessment methods in Irish and in English, perhaps,

reveal answers teachers felt were desirable (Siniscalco and Auriat 2005) or reflected what they believe to be good practice (Patten 2016). It is hoped that the data provided from the two jurisdictions, both with the aim of achieving biliteracy, could be pertinent to research in other immersion settings.

Discussion

This section puts the findings into the context of the four continua on the CoBi (Hornberger 2003). Questionnaires in this study provided an opportunity to gather a general perspective on the teaching and learning of reading in Irish immersion schools in RoI and NI, gathering information on pedagogy, resources and teacher preparation. When examined in the context of CoBi as a theoretical framework, issues have been revealed in this study that do not consider all aspects of the continua and concur with the notion that such attention could potentially improve standards (Hornberger 2022). CoBi contains the Contexts of Biliteracy, Media of Biliteracy, Content of Biliteracy, and Development of Biliteracy on continua of traditionally less and traditionally more powerful (Figure 1). Of the three themes in the current study, pedagogy, teacher preparation and resources, pedagogy was the most prevalent. Pedagogy included the introduction of formal reading, planning for the teaching of reading, descriptions of reading lessons and pupil attitudes to reading. Teachers in the current study reportedly use a range of reading contexts for reading lessons in Irish as well as a range of skill and strategy instruction taught in varying frequencies. However, it is not clear how these skills are taught and applied to reading in Irish. In Contexts of Biliteracy on the CoBi, all aspects of micro and macro biliteracy, from phonemes and grammar to language use in a broader context, need to be included in the pedagogy of reading. Support must be available at macro as well as micro levels for policy and research to be reflected in classroom practice (Hornberger 2003). This includes socio-economic factors and home and societal support for reading in Irish that differed across the jurisdictions. As well as micro–macro, the oral–literate and monolingual–bilingual aspects of this continuum must be considered in tandem.

Schools in this study, as in previous studies, reported mainly a successive approach to the introduction of formal reading in Irish and English. The Media of Biliteracy on the CoBi considers a successive and simultaneous approach to biliteracy. Introduction of languages depends on the context, children's linguistic background, attitudes, support and status of the languages (Hornberger 2003). A focus on biliteracy and the transfer of skills has the potential to mitigate issues around the successive introduction of languages as well as improve standards and strengthen metacognition. In this study, teachers reported on monolingual practices for reading in Irish and in English as two separate areas. Specific knowledge for immersion teaching is essential (Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh 2024). Teachers' descriptions of their preparedness to teach reading and experience with professional development were described as focusing on English, highlighting again the emphasis on the majority language as the traditionally more powerful practice as evident in the Content of Biliteracy on the CoBi. A lack of teacher knowledge about biliteracy has major implications for planning and assessing reading as well as for reading lessons and preparing pupils for skill and strategy use in reading in Irish and across two languages.

Responses to the open question in the questionnaires described a higher standard of reading among pupils in English than in Irish. The content of biliteracy includes the minority-majority status of languages. It is certainly a challenge to encourage children to read in a minority language such as Irish. In the current study teachers describe the lack of motivation of pupils to read in Irish in comparison to reading in English. Teachers also reported on the imbalance of resources with fewer Irish books than English books in classrooms and in school libraries and a lack of resources for specific purposes and contexts. Pedagogies and reading materials that are culturally appropriate to the minority language readers, reflecting culture, history and expression, have been successful in other minority language settings (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000). The lack of appropriate assessment tools for reading development is impacting planning for the teaching of reading and is an issue that requires attention.

The Development of Biliteracy outlines the interconnection of oral/written, receptive/productive and L1/L2 dimensions, as well as linking them with the other continua. It highlights the connections between speaking, reading and writing in a L2. Teachers require specific knowledge about how these elements interact and how development and progression may not be linear or indicate static points on a single continuum, and may diverge in other directions. All aspects of biliteracy need to be considered.

Future research

An analysis of current pedagogy in the context of CoBi has the potential to reveal gaps as well as strengths in current pedagogy and highlight areas of each continuum that could be considered. Reviewing the literature on the topic revealed a lack of research on approaches to reading in immersion settings in Ireland. This study provides a base for future research in profiling the community and gathering a general picture of the teaching and learning of reading in Irish. It is a common problem in immersion education to privilege the majority language and an important goal for research is to identify and discuss this imbalance (Hornberger 2022). Given that a balanced approach to biliteracy has potential benefits for all known languages, this study highlights areas of imbalance and the need for steps to better facilitate biliteracy. A further and more detailed examination of policy on reading in Irish, as well as suggested methodologies, could facilitate the need for the provision of specific teacher education, both initial and continuing, including the teaching and learning of transfer in literacy across Irish and English. Pupils' preference to read in English rather than in Irish is an aspect that needs more probing to ensure change and to address the imbalance. Future research could examine available books and materials in Irish and highlight possible gaps in provision or interests. The effect of sequential or simultaneous instruction of reading in two or more languages is an area for further research. Home support includes the socio-economic gap between RoI and NI, which is an area for further investigation. Similarly, parent knowledge of Irish has been highlighted as a difference across jurisdictions and is an indicator of home support for reading in Irish, with implications for impact on reading in Irish. The focus in this study on the higher primary classes could reveal attainment in reading in this age group. A focus on pupil reading scores could provide insights into how policy and pedagogy are affecting current reading scores in Irish and how they could potentially be improved. There is scope for further research to ascertain needs

of specific schools based on situation and community. The information in this study could also be further investigated and compared to other jurisdictions regarding approaches to the teaching and learning of reading.

It is clear in the context of the current study that the CoBi has opened some implementational spaces for multiple languages and literacies in Irish immersion classrooms. Hornberger intended the CoBi as a heuristic method to assist both government and classroom policy makers (Hornberger and Link 2012) with the goal of providing a more just and richly multilingual-multicultural-multimodal education (Hornberger 2022) that is also relevant to today's society and the immersion classroom in Ireland.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Research ethics statement

Ethical approval has been received in accordance with Dublin City University ethics and integrity policies, REC Reference: DCUREC/2017/192.

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