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Mixing Beginners and Native Speakers in Minority Language Immersion: Who Is Immersing Whom?

Tina Hickey

Abstract: The mixing of L1 speakers with L2 learners occurs regularly in immersion situations where a minority language is the target language. This study looks at early immersion in Irish among children from diverse language backgrounds. It examines the children's frequency of target language use and the effect of the group's linguistic mix on that use. A sample of 60 children from different language backgrounds was drawn from pre-school classes with different compositions of children from Irish-only, Irish-English, and English-only homes. The results showed relatively low levels of target language use even by the native speakers. The linguistic com- position of the group significantly affected the frequency of target language use by the L1 children and the children from bilingual homes but had less effect on the use by English speakers. The importance of addressing the needs of native speakers as well as those of beginners in such immersion situations is explored, and the implications for teacher training and teaching strategies are considered.

Introduction

The mixing of native-speaker pupils with L2leamers in the immersion classroom presents both an opportunity and a challenge. While providing an opportunity for L2learners to interact with native-speaker peers, it provides achallenge to educators to support and enrich the L1 language skills of the native speakers in a situation of language contact. This challenge is even greater when the target language is an endan- gered minority language (e.g., Irish or Welsh) or a majority language spoken by a minority in danger of being assimilated (e.g., French in Ontario) and when the speakers of that language are in contact with English-speaking peers who are acquiring the target language as L2. Such grouping of L1 and L2 learners is not uncommon in immersion situations where a minority language is the target language, where resources are

limited, or where the numbers of children in rural areas make separate services non-viable. Immersion schools and pre-schools were set up in Wales and in Ireland to support the threatened, local minority language; in each country, these programs include both L2 learners and native speakers in varying proportions depending on the language distribution in their catchment areas (Hickey, 1997, 1998; G. Jones, 1991; M. Jones 1998a, 1998b). Mougeon and Beniak (1984, 1985, 1991,1992,1994), Beniak, Carey, and Mougeon (1984), and Heller (1989, 1995, 1996) have examined language contact in Ontario classrooms attended by both French-dominant and English-dominant pupils, show- ing inter-lingual transfer from English and the linguistic consequences of restriction in French as a minority language. Ytsma (1988) also looked at language contact between Frisian- and Dutch-speaking adolescents in bilingual schools, and noted what he termed 'linguistic insecurity' in their language choice in this sociolinguistically ambiguous situation.

One-way immersion research has tended to view native speakers as controls against which to measure the progress of L2 learners (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1982) or as resources or exchange partners for L2 learners (e.g., Wallinger, 1996; Davies, 1995). However, when the target language is an endangered minority language, there is a critical need to assess the impact for language maintenance of grouping children from different language backgrounds together. This study examines language contact in Irish-medium pre-schools in the Republic of Ireland attended by both L1 speakers of Irish and English speakers who are L2 learners of Irish.

Grouping children from different language backgrounds in immersion

Research on one-way immersion programs in Canada (Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Genesee, 1984) has shown that anglophone children can be educated successfully in French. Such students show normal or above-normal academic achievement and high levels of L2 French proficiency. However, lower levels of grammatical accuracy have been observed among these students (Genesee 1987; Allen, Cummins, Harley, Lapkin, & Swain, 1988), and critics of im- mersion such as Hammerly (1987, 1989) have pointed out that a 'class- room pidgin' develops as a result of error fossilization in the immersion classroom with no exposure to L1 peers.

Two-way immersion programs in the United States deliberately provide interaction between L2 learners and L1 speaker peers by including majority language and minority language children. In such programs, anglophone children are grouped with non-English-speaking minority children, usually from kindergarten onward. The language allocation varies between schools and between grades. Instruction through each of the two school languages may be divided equally or delivered in up to 90% in the minority language and 10% in English.

Two-way immersion programs aim to develop high levels of L2 proficiency in the anglophone children at no cost to their academic progress and to provide mother tongue support for minority language children while they are acquiring English as a second language. The presence of minority language children is thought to provide valuable opportunities for peer interaction in the minority language. Lindholm and Gavlek's (1994) evaluation of a number of dual-immersion pro- grams showed enhanced L2 proficiency among the majority language children. The provision of at least a proportion of instruction through the minority language is based on research results showing the benefits of mother tongue support for minority language children (e.g., Cum- mins, *1989,*1991; Wong Fillmore, *1991a,*1991b). Advocates of two-way immersion argue that such programs offer mother tongue support for minority language children in high-prestige programs, with access to the majority language through instruction and through peer interaction.

However, Valdes (1997) sounds a note of caution with regard to these programs. She cites the potentially damaging effects on L1 minority language children of hearing language that is modified to be comprehensible to their L2 classmates. Ramirez and Merino (1989) showed that, when speaking to mixed groups of native speakers and students with limited English proficiency, immersion teachers explained themselves significantly more often, asked far fewer questions, gave less feedback, and modelled for repetition more often than they did when speaking to unmixed groups of students. They interpreted these fea- tures as evidence of teachers' sensitivity to the special needs of the lower proficiency students. Similarly, Mougeon and Beniak (1984) noted that, in Canadian schools serving francophones but including some anglophones, teachers slowed down and adapted their language for the anglophone students, with consequent slower progress among the native speakers.

Valdes also commented on children's awareness of the different values attached to the languages in two-way immersion. For minority children, speedy acquisition of English is expected, whereas for anglophone children any attempt at acquiring the minority language is applauded. She concluded that the twin aims of two-way immersion – the promotion of L2 acquisition among majority language children and education through the medium of their mother tongue for minority language children – have very different agendas, which must be reviewed with particular reference to intergroup relations and societal power structures.

Assessment of the impact of grouping majority and minority language children together requires a broadening of perspective from the classroom to include the wider sociolinguistic context. Genesee (1987) argues that successful programs for minority language pupils depend on raising the status and power of the minority language and the prestige of those who speak it as Ll. This requires more than the for- mal use of the minority language as a medium of instruction by teachers if the L1 speakers are surrounded by peers who speak a majority language that has higher status in

the wider societal context. It will be argued here that even young children show an awareness of the status accorded to the languages in their environment.

Immersion in Wales and the Republic of Ireland could be described as a mixed system, which in some districts resembles the Canadian experience described by Swain (1981) of children beginning with the same levels of target language skills, that is, none, and in other districts (where more significant numbers of native speakers reside) resembles two-way immersion or the situation described by Mougeon and Beniak (1994), where first- and second-language speakers of the target language are not separated.

Baker and Jones (1998), Cummins (1995), Wong Fillmore (1991a), Mougeonand Beniak (1984), and Swain (1981) have discussed the right of minority language children to receive support for their mother tongue in early education so that they are able to reach a high level of competence in their L1 before exposure to the majority language. Corson (1993) recommended that in social situations where there is likely to be serious erosion of the first (minority) language, then that language needs development and mainte- nance if intellectual performance is not to suffer.... Ancestral minority language-speaking children whose language and culture have been marginalized ... may arrive in school with their first languages relatively underdeveloped in certain styles, contexts and functions of use. (p. 50, 87)

Similarly, Swain (1981) advocated that minority language children be introduced to immersion later than majority language children, so that their mother tongue would not be affected adversely by contact with the majority language. Wong Fillmore (1991b) discussed the problem of minority language children's L1 being gradually eroded as a conse- quence of learning English. She suggests that the solution is to provide early education programs emphasizing the development of mother tongue skills in such children before introducing English. Such mother tongue support for minority language children is a stated aim of the *naíonraí,* or Irish-medium kindergartens. Other aims are the promotion of the acquisition of Irish as a second language among the anglophone majority and the promotion of the overall intellectual,social, emotional, and physical development of children. As already noted, it is usually not feasible in Ireland and Wales to separate L1 speakers of the minority language from L2 learners of the language, due to the low numbers of children in each group and their dispersal in rural areas. There has also been some debate in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland over whether separating such children would be desirable or divisive in terms of community development. As currently imple- mented, both L1 and L2 speakers may attend *naíonraí,*and, while the L1 minority language children do receive mother tongue support there, they are also exposed to the majority language from their L2 peers.

In effect, these L1 speakers of the minority language may experience both official and unofficial immersion: official immersion in the target language used consistently by the group leader (aiming to support their mother tongue development) and unofficial immersion in the

majority language used by their peers. While it is often assumed that a particular physical location provides children with cues to adhere to a particular language, Baker (1997) noted that in reality it is the teacher and the other students who influence language choice. He points out that, in bilingual classrooms similar to the Irish-medium pre-schools examined here, where a minority language is to be preserved in children, some separate treatment of L1 and L2 learners may be a desirable policy. However, survey data (Hickey, 1999; Hickey & 6Cainin, in press) show that such separation rarely occurs in the Irish situation and is not officially promoted.

The influence of the unofficial language of the classroom, rather than the target language, has been observed in Wales by Jones (1984, 1991), who found that when primary school L1 speakers of Welsh were mixed with L2 learners, the Welsh speakers tended to accommodate to the interlanguage of the learners, rather than the L2learners adapting to the norms of the L1 speakers. Chesterfield, Hayes-Larimer, Barrows Chesterfield, and Chavez (1983) also found that the linguistic composi- tion of the pre-school class affected not only the overall linguistic environment of the classroom but the relative importance of interactions with teachers or with peers in L2 acquisition.

If such grouping of children from different linguistic backgrounds appears less than ideal for the L1 minority language children, is there at least a benefit for the L2 learners, as Krashen (1985), Long {1985), and Baetens Beardsmore (1993) argued? While in principle it would appear that L2 learners would benefit from exposure to L1 peers, this paper will argue that the situation is not so straightforward. In the case of majority language speakers acquiring a minority language, L1 minority speakers may be more motivated to acquire and switch to the higher- status language than the L2 learners, struggling with their low levels of competence in the lower-status target language, are to learn the target language. This study focuses on the actual language use of a group of children from different language backgrounds in groups where L1 speakers and L2 learners are mixed. Excerpts from the transcripts of two children are given to illustrate the nature of some of the interactions observed between *naíonra Stiurth6iri* (leaders) and children and between children.

Background to Irish-medium education

The children in this study were between three and five years and were attending voluntary Irish-medium pre-schools or *naíonraí* in Irish- speaking communities in the Republic oflreland. Education through the medium of Irish has grown significantly in the last 20 years in English-speaking parts of the country, while there has been a simultaneous decline in the number of speakers in officially designated Irish-speaking districts *(Gaeltachtai),* which are mainly located along the western seaboard. Specific development grants are allocated to these areas,

based on their official designation as Irish-speaking, and Udaras na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Authority) coordinates initiatives to promote employment and community development there. However, census figures (Census 1996) show that only 76% of the total residents in *Gaeltacht* areas aged three years and over were classified by the respondent in each household as competent speakers of the language, and some districts reported proportions as low as 59%. The sociolinguistic restrictions affecting use of Irish in these areas are increasing as the proportion of speakers declines. In fact, 39% of Irish speakers in these communities stated that they used Irish on a weekly basis only, sometimes even less often. In previous studies (1997, 1999), I discuss the profile of Irish competence among three-year-olds in *Gaeltacht* areas, and Ó Riagain (1997) provides a fuller account of the decline of Irish there.

In the 1960s, some of the major Irish language revival organizations initiated a movement to provide Irish-medium pre-schooling, based on the Welsh experience, in an attempt to counteract the perceived decline in Irish standards in schools. These *naíonraí* were developed and sup- ported in Irish-speaking districts by Udaras na Gaeltachta and An Comhchoiste Reamhscolaiochta (the national coordinating body for *naíonraí)* in order to provide mother tongue support for Irish L1 children and early immersion for L2 learners. A significant growth in the number of these schools has occurred, from one in 1968 to over 200 in 1996, serving about 3,000 children in English- and Irish-speaking parts of the country. *Naíonraí* are subsidized in *Gaeltacht* areas in order to encourage parents to send their children to them. The rationale of the *naíonra* movement is three-fold. **It** is based on the belief that:

1. Pre-school education is beneficial to the child, family and community.
2. Young children acquire a second language naturally in appropriate conditions.
3. Increasing children's competence increases/supports the use of Irish in the home and community.

In the *naíonra,* a *Stiúrth6ir,* or leader, engages children aged three to five years in stimulating, age-appropriate, and enjoyable tasks through the medium of Ifish. The aims of the *naíonraí* are to promote the general development of the child in every way and to help the child to acquire Irish as a first or second language in a natural and informal setting. *Naíonraí* emphasize the importance of learning through play for young children and of acquiring the target language naturally through context- based learning rather than through formal teaching.

Language use in pre-school in Irish-speaking communities

In a 1997 study, I reported the results of a national study of Irish- medium pre-schooling in Ireland, looking at the teaching methods used, the attitudes and socio-dernographic profile of parents,

and the outcome in terms of children's scores on a comprehension and production test. A further study (Hickey, 1999) consisted of an in-depth examination of children's language use in *naíonraí* in the *Gaeltacht* or Irish-speaking districts. Some of the questions addressed in this study that are examined here are:

1. What proportion of children attending *naíonraí* in Irish-speaking communities are L1 speakers of Irish, what proportion are bilin- gual from horne, and what proportion are L2 learners?
2. What is the language mix in individual *Gaeltacht naíonraí?*
3. How much Irish (target language) do children in these groups use?

Children's Irish ability

Naíonra leaders completed a brief questionnaire on each child in their group, giving the child's age, sex, horne language, and time spent attending the pre-school. They were also given a five-point scale of Irish competence, ranging from 'comprehension only' to 'native speaker competence,' on which to score each child. Thus, background data on all of the 670 children attending *naíonraí* in these districts were collected from the leaders, in order to develop a profile of the language ability of this population of children. The results showed that only a minority (22%) attending these groups in officially designated Irish-speaking communities were judged to have native-speaker ability. Overall, about a third of the children (36%) had from good-to-native competence in the language, roughly a third (29%) had moderate Irish proficiency (some productive ability), and a third (35%) were early L2leamers (with some comprehension and very limited production).

Language ability variation within groups

These varying levels of ability were distributed throughout the 55 pre- school groups in *Gaeltacht* areas, and it was judged important to assess the mix of language ability within these *naíonraí* and to examine the effect of that mix on the children's language use. The proportion of children from Irish-only, bilingual, and English-only homes in each *naíonra* was calculated using the home language data; Table 1 presents the resulting distribution among *naíonraí.*

Insert Table 1 about here

Only a fifth of these groups in officially designated Irish-speaking communities had a majority of children from Irish-speaking homes. In two-fifths of all of the groups, English monolinguals dominated. In over a quarter, the majority came from bilingual homes, where the term 'bilingual' encompasses a fairly wide range of home use of Irish. The distribution of Irish- or English-dominant groups within these officially Irish-speaking districts offers valuable data on the

decline or resurgence of the language in individual communities and also points to the range of strategies necessary to address the needs of the children attending Irish-medium pre-schools in these areas.

Observational study of language use in Irish-medium pre-schools

In addition to collecting background data on all of the children attending *naíonraí* in these districts, the questionnaire completed by *naíonra* leaders was used to develop a sampling frame from which 60 children were selected for an observational study. Based on the data above regarding group composition, ten *naíonra:Z* were chosen: three in which at least 50% of the children were Irish native speakers, three in which 50%+ Were from English-only homes, and four in which neither English-only nor Irish-only home backgrounds accounted for more than half of the children. (In three of these four groups, more than half of the children came from homes where both Irish and English were spoken.) In each of the sampled *naíonraí*, six children were selected, with two from each language background where possible. Data on home lan guage were cross-checked with information solicited from p uents in a questionnaire, with precedence given to the parents' reports. The parents' questionnaire was bilingual and had been used in an earlier, national study of the *naíonraí* (Hickey, 1997) which collected responses from 1,807 parents (a response rate of 73%). Parents completed the questionnaire at home before returning it to the researcher in pre-paid envelopes, with the knowledge that their information would be processed in confidence and not affect their relationship with the *naíonra.* The questionnaire asked about current and past home language use, parents' Irish ability, educational attainments and occupation, and their involvement in, and language needs in relation to, the work of the *naíonra.* Mothers or fathers could complete the questionnaire and were asked to' supply spousal information as appropriate. In all, the parents of 49 of the 60 observed children returned this questionnaire, a response rate of 82%. The information relating to issues other than home language use is discussed elsewhere (Hickey, 1999).

The final distribution of children in the observational study was as follows: 20 children from homes where only Irish was spoken, 23 children from bilingual homes, and 16 children from English-only homes. One child was omitted from the study because a third language was also spoken in the home. In addition to being observed, each of the 59 sample children was given an individual test in Irish comprehension and production and a test in general cognitive ability in their dominant language, administered by the *comhairleoir* (advisor) who visited/ inspected their *naíonra* each month. This advisor was familiar to the children and spoke their dialect Of Irish (there are three main dialects). The advisors were trained in the administration of these tests, which had been specially developed for the national *naíonra* study (see Hickey, 1997). In all cases, this testing was carried out in the weeks immediately following observation, in a room adjacent to the *naíonra.*

Each child was observed for two periods of 20 minutes, using the Sylva, Roy, and Painter (1980) observational system for pre-school children. Target children were observed on two different days in order to minimize the chance of their under-performing, and observation slots were assigned randomly to sample the full *naíonra* routine from soon after arrival, through the morning's activities, to lunch and departure. Children in the *naíonraí* usually follow a routine that includes self- directed play (e.g., with sand, water, jigsaws, paint, *or* Lego) and teacher-led games, songs, art, ·or physical activities. The emphasis throughout is on exploration and play, in line with recommendations ·regarding quality provision for pre-school children (e.g., Rumbold, 1990). Leaders may invite a small group to engage in activities such as painting or sand play together, or to play in the 'home corner,' while other children are engaged in self-selected play activities. Observation of *naíonraí* indicates that children generally appear to be busily engaged in their tasks, with about half of their time (Hickey, 1999) spent on self- directed activities and half in teacher-led activities. The latter are, of course, of the type appropriate to pre-schoolers and are less formal than those found in elementary school classrooms.

During observation, the target child wore a 'Sam Brown'-style fabric belt with a concealed radio microphone and transmitter. All other children in the group wore a. seemingly identical belt, so that the target child was not conspicuous either to them or to the leader. (Pre-testing with these. belts indicated that children were comfortable with them, and some volunteered that they made them look like 'Captain Fantas- tic.') The observer wore earphones receiving the microphone signal, so that she could hear the child even when he or she was turned away from her, permi ting less intrusive observation. The observer had many years of experience in *naíonraí* as an advisor and had trained in a similar observational system as part of another national research project on early education. She gained expertise with the Sylva et al. system initially using videotapes of pre-schoolers before spending some training days observing in *naíonraí.* Following observation, a test of observer reliability was carried out in a *naíonra* not included in the sampling frame for this study, with dual observation of five children for 20 minutes each (200 30-second intervals) by the observer and the author. The observation sheets were subsequently coded by each observer, with comparisons of the codings showing a high level of agreement (Cohen's Kappa= .88), comparable to the agreement (Kappa = .92) found in the Sylva et al. study. In the main observational study of the *naíonraí,* every target child was observed by the same observer, so there was no inter-rater effect.

In practice, the observer used a special observation sheet divided into sections for each 30-second observational period. She noted the target-child's activities at each 30-second observation point and also noted, in the appropriate columns, whether the child was engaged alone or in a pair, small group, or large group; to whom he or she was speaking; and what the leader was doing at that time. One difference from Sylva et al.'s observational method was that the

observer did not have to transcribe the children's utterances, since they were being taped; this allowed for the making of more detailed observational notes. Later the same day, the observer coded her observations using her notes and the tapes of each child. The tape-scripts from the target children were transcribed in CHILDES format by an Irish L1 speaker, and each utterance was coded as wholly English, Irish, mixed, or ambiguous.

Target language use

Table 2 presents the summary data on the children's proportional use of Irish, broken down by home language and cross-tabulated with the information on the language mix within groups. Analysis of variance showed a significant effect of home language ($p. < .006$) on the mean percentage of Irish utterances spoken by each group. The children from Irish-only homes spoke Irish in about half of their total utterances during the observational period, the children from bilingual homes in about a third of their utterances, and the children from English-only homes in about a quarter. Overall, analysis showed that Irish utterances constituted less than a quarter of the output of 42% of the children and less than half of the utterances of 32% of the children.

The effect of the language mix in the *naíonra* on the mean percentage of Irish utterances was not statistically significant ($p < .14$), but there was a tendency for children from bilingual homes to produce a lower proportion of Irish utterances (16%) in *naíonraí* where English L1 speak- ers dominated. On the other hand, being in a group where most were Irish L1 speakers did not significantly increase the proportional use of the target language by the L2 learners, who spoke Irish in about a quarter of their total output. Similarly, the Irish L1 group produced about half of their utterances in Irish regardless of the group mix.lt may be that majority language children do not need to constitute the majority in a group to influence the language choice of the minority language children. The case studies will show that even one or two English speakers in a group affected the minority language children's use of their own language, even when they did not outnumber the Irish L1 children.

The average figures for target language use appear quite low for all the children and for native speakers in particular, given that they were attending groups where official and active support is accorded to their mother tongue. However, it must be remembered that that support comes principally from the leader, and research on early education shows that children in pre-school groups spend relatively little time talking to their teacher. Sylva et al. (1980) observed children in mother tongue English nursery schools in Britain and found that only 5-10% of their target children's 30-second observational periods contained talk with a leader. The relative frequency of talk by the target-children in this study is shown in Table 3.

INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

These data indicate that talk with a teacher was significantly more frequent in Irish-medium pre-schools than in those studied by Sylva et al. (1980). Nevertheless, only about a quarter of the observational periods were spent in direct interaction with the leader, a fifth in inter- action with another child, and about a quarter in talkin aloud to them- selves. Overall, the children spent about a third of their time in silence.

Thus, for these children, talk with peers occurs almost as frequently as talk with the adult leader. The proportion of private speech observed is higher than that noted by other observational studies of this age group carried out in Britain and Ireland (Sylva et al., 1980; Douglas, 1993; Horgan, 1995) but may result from the fact that this study, unlike those cited, taped children with a lapel microphone and employed the Sylva et al. coding scheme to observe them; therefore, the study was more sensitive to this type of language use, which can often be quite inaudible.

Overall, as expected, the data on the mean percentage use of Irish show higher proportional use by L1 Irish speakers than by the other groups. However, a child who produces 100 utterances, of which half are in Irish, will have a different effect on the salience of the language in the group than a child who produces 10 utterances, of which half are in Irish. Therefore, Figure **1** presents the data on the mean number of Irish utterances in order to illustrate the impact of language use by the different groups of children in different types of *naíonraí*

Figure **1** shows that children from Irish-speaking homes produced about twice as many Irish utterances on average as did those from bilingual or English-only homes. However, the language mix in the group also exerted a significant effect on their output: (ANOVA showed statistical effects of Home Language $p < .01$ and of the language mix in the group $(p < .03$ on the mean number of Irish utterances). In groups with fl. majority of Irish L1 speakers or bilinguals, the mean output of the children from Irish-only homes was between 50 and 61 Irish utterances during observation, whereas this frequency was halved to as low as 23 Irish utterances on average in groups with a majority of L2 learners. In fact, the mean number of Irish utterances produced by the L1 Irish children in the groups that had a majority of children from English-only homes was comparable to the number of Irish utterances produced by the English-speaking children themselves. This finding suggests that Irish L1 children were mirroring the target language output of the L2 learners, rather than providing them with increased input or stimulating them to speak more Irish.

INSERT FIG 1 ABOUT HERE

An even greater decline in the number of Irish utterances occurred among children from bilingual

homes when they were in groups with a majority of English-speaking children. The children from bilingual homes produced most of their Irish utterances when in groups with a majority of Irish L1 speakers, but they had the lowest mean output of Irish utterances of *any* group when they were in *naíonraí* with a majority of children from English-only homes. Thus, the children from bilingual homes appeared to be the most susceptible to group language, produc- ing more Irish utterances when in Irish-dominant groups but fewer Irish utterances than even the anglophones when in English L1 dominant groups. They seemed to exhibit a 'chameleon' effect of accommodating their level of Irish use to the prevailing norm within the group.

Looking at the anglophones or L2 learners of Irish in these groups, we find that their mean production of utterances in the target language was relatively stable, whether in groups dominated by L2learners or L1 speakers of Irish. As expected, the anglophones spoke Irish least frequently, with a mean of only 24 utterances during 40 minutes of observation. Their mean level of Irish production was influenced less by the language mix in the *naíonra* than were either of the other two home language groups. Overall, it appeared that attending a *naíonra* with a majority of children from Irish-only or Irish-English homes did not significantly increase the anglophones' output in Irish.

Data on the total utterances of the target children indicate that the Irish L1 children were far less talkative in groups where English speakers dominated, despite the fact that their *proportional* use of Irish remained stable. Thus, in groups where English speakers dominated, the minority language children spoke significantly less often, though still speaking Irish in about half of their utterances. The bilinguals, on the other hand, did not become less talkative overall in the English- dominant group but did switch to using more English.

Language contact phenomena and minority language contraction have been studied in a number of settings. M. Jones (1998a) investigated the contraction evident in the Welsh of children, teenagers, and adults under 40 years, compared to that of older adults, and discussed this in light of the data from Cornish and Breton and from East Sutherland Gaelic (Dorian, 1981, 1989). Heller (1989, 1995) has looked at language use and language choice among teenagers in groups from different language backgrounds in Ontario schools for francophones, showing the tension experienced between their two worlds – that of the peer group, dominated by English, and that of school, symbolized by and lived in French. The much younger children in this study were also experiencing language contact and, while their language choices . indicated their awareness of speaker networks in their groups, there were.some significant differences observed in the sensitivity shown by minority language and majority language children to their bilingual environment. Case studies are provided here to illustrate language use in the *naíonra* by two children from different language backgrounds and their perception of the language demands imposed by the *naíonra* group in which they found themselves.

Children's language use: Two case studies

Irish L1 speaker in Irish-dominant naíonra group

The target child, ' Eoin,' was an Irish L1 speaker aged 4;10 at the time of observation and in his second year in the *naíonra*. Both parents reported being L1 speakers of Irish, and he scored maximum points on the test of Irish comprehension and production, obtaining a score of 82% on the test of general cognitive ability developed for this study (see Hickey, 1997). He was in an Irish-dominant *naíonra* comprised of six Irish Ll speakers, two children from bilingual homes, and two from English- only homes

During one observation period, Eoin was occupied with filling a peg- board with coloured pegs. Seated beside him was his friend 'Sean,' another Irish L1 speaker, similarly engaged. The boys were commenting on their progress in completing their boards and competing to finish, with Eoin, in particular, keeping up a commentary on his work:

Eoin: Beidh mise reitithe romhat X 2 *I'll be finished before you (singing)*

Sean: Beidh mise *I will be*

Eoin: Beidh mise *I will be*

Ta dha row deanta agamsa *I have two rows done*

Mise ag deanamh dha. row *I [am] doing two rows*

Sean: Eoin!

Eoin: Peach ar mise Sean *Look at me Sean*

Sean: xx rows ata agamsa Eoin Eoin: *xx rows I have Eoin (singing)*

Ta nios m6 deanta agamsa Sean: Peach *I have more done (singing)*

an meid ata agamsa Eoin: Peach an *Look how much I have*

meid ata deanta

agamsa x3 *Look how much I have done x*

Peach an meid- 3

Beidh mise reitithe romhat Ta "a (=go) *Look how much*

leor deanta agamsa *I'll be finished before you*

Sean, " Féacha, Féacha Sean Féacha

I have lots done

Dean deifir Sean *Sean "looka, looka Sean, looka*

Sean: *(unintelligible)* *Hurry up Sean*

Eoin: Ach Féacha *mise (=ormsa)

*But *looka I (=me) Hurry!*

Dean deifir *Done (done by-me)*

Deanta agam!

O níl!

Deanta agam

Oh it's not (spotting empty hole)

Done (done by-me)

(shouting, emptying pins back into box)

The boys' excitement about this competition attracted the attention of some other children, one of whom approached them, a girl named 'Orla.' While her home language was English, she was In her second year In the *naíonra* and had scored 81% on the Irish production test, IndicatIng good Irish proficiency. She addressed the target-child:

Orla: Eoin, can I play with you?
Can I play with you? Can I?

Eoin responded In English, as he himself started to fill his peg-board agaIn:

Eoin: You xxx the same

The three children then contInued with the peg-board game, but Eoin now commented in English on the competition to complete the task:

Eoin: Now we got the xxx
Look Orla
I'll be fInished before you Orla
But I got four Look at me Put it there
Look what I have (laughIng)
Look at xx Orla (laughIng)
Put them In there
Sean: Eoin, xx play Orla *(unclear, may have wanted him to race Orla)*
Eoin: Stop Orla! *(she was taking some of his pins)*
Orla: I want to xxx
Eoin: Don't you now *(guarding* his *pins)*
That's your one ... here
Here, that's your one *(giving her a pin of colour she was collecting)*
ChlO: Look how many I have *(other child commenting from another game nearby)*
Eoin: Oh look what I have!

The three children were now engaged in the peg-board activity, and Eoin's comments were in the same vein as previously, but now they were in English, even when they seemed to be directed generally at both · Sean and Orla. In the interaction above, Sean also switched to English

in order to direct his friend's play with the anglophone child. Yet later, Sean reverted to Irish, possibly in an attempt to regain Eoin's exclusive attention, and Eoin responded to him in Irish as before, switching directly to Irish:

Sean: Féach *mise *Look [at] me*

Eoin: Agus Féach *ar mise (=ormsa) *Look *at me*

Leader: Carr m6r deanta agat *You've made a big car (comment to child in group playing nearby)*

Eoin: Ta muide ag deanamh nios mó! *We are doing more (to Leader)*

Silly, Féach an dath buí *Silly, iook at the yellow colour (to himselJ)*

Turning from this Irish interchange with Sean, his bid for the adult's attention, and his private speech, Eoin called out excitedly to a passing child:

Eoin: Féach ar muide *Look at us*

Ainm *Name*

This statement appeared to reflect a lapse, however, in his judgement of the appropriate language to speak to different people in the group, as the child he addressed came from an English-only home and had limited Irish competence. Eoin then turned back to Sean and continued:

Eoin: Féach ar méid ata deanta agamsa

Sean *Look at how much I've done Sean*

Ta ceithre cinn deanta agamsa *I have four done (laughing)*

I'll be finished before you *(singing)*

ChlO: I'm not doing it *(the peg-board game)* *(other child, stopping to look)*

Eoin: That's where you play with this game *(sing-song)*

ChlO: Hah?

Eoin: You have to play with this game

You, you play with this game

You have to do it ... this with the game

... this *(sing-song voice)*

Orla: This is xxx *(singing)*

Eoin: This xxx the race game *(singing)*

Eoin's awareness of which language to use to address other children rarely failed him. His total interactions showed that during this observational period he spoke only Irish when talking directly to two Irish L1 children and to the leader. Similarly, he spoke only English to Orla, who was from an English-only home. In minor interactions, he was slightly less accurate, responding in English when he heard another Irish L1 child (ChlO) speak English, and once addressing an English L1 child in Irish following his own Irish conversation with Sean. In general, he appeared to be adjusting his language choice to his interlocutor, rather than operating on a general principle of speaking the target language of the group, which was his Ll. His code-switching did not seem to be influenced by the activity in which he was engaged, as he said much the same things in both languages in the above excerpts. Instead, his language choice appeared to be based on the language of the child whom he was addressing directly; however, he spoke English when addressing a small group comprising an Irish L1 speaker and L2 learners. Despite the predominance of Irish speakers in this group, 40% of Eoin's observed utterances were in English, 40% in Irish, and 5% were mixed. The remainder were ambiguous (names to call attention, which were frequent in his data) or unintelligible. It appeared that Eoin found it easier to maintain Irish in a direct one-to-one interaction with another Irish L1 speaker; when addressing a mixed group, he spoke English, even if there were Irish L1 children in that group.

L2 learner in Irish-dominant group

When Orla, the L2leamer from the previous excerpt, was herself the target child, she had a revealing exchange with the leader. At the time, the leader was engaged in a vocabulary-enrichment/nature study activity, presenting items from the seashore and allowing the children to examine them while she spoke about them and provided the Irish terms. Orla showed great interest in this activity and was very keen to get some shells:

Leader: An bhfuil a fhios ag duine ar bith ceard iad seo? *Does anyone know what these are? Scallops*

Orla: No

Leader: Muirín Ar ith tusa muirín ariamh? *Did you ever eat a scallop? I did*

Orla: D'ith (eat-Past)

Leader: Blonn muirín, bionn sé dúnta mar sin *A scallop is – it is closed like this*

Orla: Gimme them

(to child beside her holding some shells)

Gimme all of them you have

Gimme every one of them you have

Other Ch: xxx *(unintelligible)*

Orla: Every one of them

Even that one

Leader: Tá siad crua, nach bhfuil siad crua? *They are hard, aren't they hard? (to group)*

Orla: And even that one

Gimme

I'm putting **it** back *(shell into box)*

Ch: I'm not going to give it to you unless you, unless you say please

Orla: Please will you give it to me thanks

At this point the leader, who had been speaking throughout to the group, noticed Orla's avid interest in the shells on the table and said:

Leader:	An bhfuil tusa ag iarraidh ceann?	*Do you want one?*
	Tú ag iarraidh muirín ab'ea?	*You want a scallop,* is it?
Orla:	Will you get me that	
Leader:	nother shell please?	
Orla:	'Tá mise ag iarraidh ... ?	
Leader:	Muir..?	*I want the ... ?*
	Will you get me that nother	*... scallop ... ?*
Orla:	shell? Muirín	*Scallop*
	Will you give me that nother shell?	

So intent on having the item was Orla that she seemed unaware that the leader was trying to elicit at first a sentence and then a word from her in the target language, using intonational cues. Orla's response showed that she did not understand why the leader was withholding the item that she was requesting; she then cast around for an explana- tion. Remembering why the other child had refused her earlier (with a reason that pre-school children often hear for adults' refusal), she said:

Orla: I didn't say 'please'!

The leader did not appear to notice this comment. She continued with her attempt to elicit the appropriate sentence in the target language, saying it clearly twice, although by now she was not quite sure which of the shells in front of her the child wanted:

Leader: Tá mise ag iarraidh na sceana mara x 2 *I want the razor-clams x* 2

The child put her new plan into action, hoping that this would placate the recalcitrant leader:

Orla: Give me that nother shell. PLEASE

But the leader continued with her patient attempt to elicit the Irish utterance:

Leader: Tá mise ag iarraidh na sceana mara *x2* *I want the razor clams x* 2

By now Orla was confused and irritated that her strategy was not succeeding. She complained loudly:

Orla: I said – I SAID please!

Then she decided to take matters into her own hands, literally, turning to look at the shells held by another child beside her:

Other Ch: I don't have any *(defensively)*
Orla: Gimme some!
Other Ch: I don't have any!

Even five terms spent in this small group of ten children where Irish was the medium of instruction, and where six of her peers were Irish L1 speakers, had apparently not instilled in this majority language child an awareness of the need to try to communicate in the target language of the group she attended. She did not seem to realize that the formal agenda of the *naíonra* leader was to elicit Irish from her. Instead she focused on the pragmatics of the encounter rather than on the target language of the group. Overall, only 19% ofOrla's total utterances dur- ing observation were in the target language, while 61% were in English. One percent were mixed utterances, and the remainder were ambiguous (she called out names frequently to attract attention) or unintelligible. Orla's reluctance to speak Irish was not based entirely on limited 12 proficiency, since her scores on the Irish tests were high. Hence this excerpt illustrates the gap between being able to produce utterances in a language and being ready, or seeing the need, to do so.

Discussion

The results of this study raise some important questions for immersion education in minority language situations and for minority language revitalization. They will be considered here in terms of language restriction and shift and recommended response.

Language Restriction and Language Shift

The data showed that the actual language use by children in these Irish- medium pre-schools is skewed towards English, with about half of all of the utterances by Irish L1 speakers being in English, about two-thirds of the utterances by children from bilingual homes, and three-quarters of the utterances by L2leamers. This relatively low level of Irish usage, even by the Ll Irish speakers, requires serious consideration. Baker and Jones (1998) noted that pre-school children aged three or four years have not attained com- plete competence in their mother tongue. They are consequently very vulnerable to the influence of English at nursery school, and tend to shift to using English quite quickly.... The children are also vulnerable to the high social status and predominance of English. They hear the language ... on television, in the cinema and in the community. (p. 494)

These data show that they also hear the majority language from their peers in the pre-school that sets out to support their mother tongue development. Denvir (1989) has argued that the ubiquitous influence of English has resulted in an attenuation of the Irish

spoken by young L1 speakers, with reduced accuracy and vocabulary G. Jones (1991) and M. Jones (1998a,1998b) have observed similar influences from the interlan- guage of L2learners on the Welsh spoken by L1 children, with the Welsh L1 children adopting the errors ofthe L2learners rather than influencing them to use the correct forms. Mougeon and Beniak (1992, 1991) and Mougeon, Beniak, and Valois (1985) found evidence of syntactic convergence among French-dominant students in Ontario.

Signs of such convergence have previously been noted in young children acquiring Irish as their L1 (e.g., Hickey, 1993). The Irish utter- ances of the L1 speakers in the *naíonraí* showed them to be in need of L1 enrichment in vocabulary and syntax, for which there had been no explicit training or provision until recently in the *naíonra* service. **It** should be noted that some *naíonra* leaders in *Gaeltacht* areas advocated that linguistically complex activities such as story-telling or reading aloud to children should be postponed for the whole group·until the L2 learners were ready for them. This means that, in their *naíonraí,* activities which are regarded as central to most models of pre-school education and which promote context-independent language use and vocabulary development did not occur regularly. Thus, the Irish L1 children in those groups were not provided with regular opportunities to hear stories read or told, because these activities were not considered suitable for the 12 learners until they reached a certain level of proficiency (itself a moot point).

Managing this conflict between maintaining and developing the L1 of minority language children and promoting language revival among 12 learners of that language is of fundamental importance in all minority language situations. This issue has generated controversy in Ontario, where English-dominant children of French-mother tongue parents are entitled to attend French-medium schools that cater specifically to francophones. Mougeon and Beniak (1994) noted that some parents and teachers have questioned whether, in attempting to achieve a language revival, such schools are not short-changing francophone students, who require language maintenance. As a result, they report that many such schools are separating English-dominant students from French-dominant students for at least the early years of elementary schooling. Other schools are providing intensive French for the English-dominant students.

Separating students in the Irish context is likely to meet with resistance on grounds of impracticality, because of the low-density distribution of Irish L1 speakers and, indeed, of pre-school children in these rural areas, and possibly also on grounds of discrimination. While the Constitution states that Irish 'as the national language is the first official language' of the state (Article 8), Irish-language bodies have argued that a Language Act with enforcement power is necessary to defend language

rights and to maintain and revitalize the language. However, even the Language Act currently advocated (Comhdhail Naisilll1ta na Gaeilge, 1998) is confined to recommending 'that the right of all citizens to receive their education through the medium of Irish from pre-school level to the completion of third level shall be consoli- dated.' Such legislation would not be likely to support separate services for Irish L1 children. Given the likelihood that the current situation of grouping L1 speakers with L2 learners will continue, the differing needs of the children within these mixed classrooms must be addressed explicitly in order to promote the mother tongue enrichment of the L1 children, as well as to encourage L2 acquisition by language learners. An adequate response to these needs requires the development of appropriate teach- er training, curricula, and work organization, as well as the resourcing of extra personnel to allow regular grouping by language ability.

Recommended responses: Training, resources and work organization

In order to address the needs of all of the children attending these pre- schools, leaders must first explore issues such as the real meaning of child-centredness and flexible grouping by ability and the importance ascribed to mother tongue enrichment for Ll speakers. Structured interviews with the sample leaders (Hickey, 1999; Hickey & 6 Cainin, in press) indicated that they were resistant to organizing activities in such a way as to allow native speakers to work together, preferring to let children choose their own activities and partners. All but one leader surveyed indicated that they never grouped L1 speakers together or offered them more linguistically demanding tasks. Most explained that such arrangements would not be practical, though others added that they felt it would be 'unfair' to allocate time to the L1 children when the needs of the L2 children were 'greater' or 'more pressing.' Several leaders felt that such grouping was undesirable because it would high- light differences between the children; they argued that it was fairer to treat all children the same. However, this is a misunderstanding of the concept of child-centredness, since equal treatment of different children does not necessarily mean the same treatment is given to each child. While the leader interviews showed a high degree of commitment to the promotion of 12 learning and to the principle of treating children equally, in many cases their operational focus appeared to be on the needs of the L2learners, to the detriment of the needs of the Ll children for support and enrichment and of the wider objective of promoting target language use in the group as a whole.

It would be desirable to initiate among these leaders an examination of the kind of communities represented by these *naíonraí,* and the ways in which the social structures

in the group are organized (see Toohey, 1996). Sheets and Hollins (1999) argue that allowing children to work in same-language or same-ethnic groupings brings social and cognitive advantages, as well as self-empowerment. Sheets has noted (Sheets, 1999) that, while white majority language children are normally granted the resource of being grouped in the classroom with same-ethnic children, children of colour or other languages tend to be spread out in order to provide diversity and to serve as cultural carriers. Interviews with leaders indicated a tendency to view the Irish L1 children in the same way; this belief, in conjunction with a laudable commitment to free play and exploration by pre-school children, may result in sessions which inadvertently fail to provide L1 speakers with sufficient opportunities to interact with other L1 speakers of the minority language.

There is a need to offer all leaders in-service modules on language enrichment for L1 children which explore ways of helping to make children and parents aware that the leader and *naíonra* organization rec;ognize and value the special skills of Irish L1 children, and that the further development of those language skills is a central aim of the *naíonra.* New training courses have recently been developed by Udaras na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Authority) and An Comhchoiste Reamh- scolafochta (the coordinating body of the *naíonraf),* and a state-recog- nized course in Early Education, with a specialization in Irish-medium education, has been offered to a number of leaders since 1998. Training modules on language enrichment for Irish L1 children are included in this course, and ways of developing specific language objectives for children of different language abilities and of increasing the frequency of Irish usage in the *naíonraí* are also explored. The challenge for the future lies in bringing this course to all *naíonra* leaders and in facilitating the implementation of its recommendations.

Training in the use of positive reinforcement techniques to support Irish use among children would also be desirable. Such techniques, if successfully implemented with parental approval, would make clear both to children and parents that use of this minority language is valued explicitly inthe *naíonra* in all interactions, not just in official interactions with the *Stiurth6ir* /leader. Research is needed on the effectiveness of such behaviour modification techniques in promoting Irish use by all *naíonra* children.

Baker and Jones (1998) have emphasized the need to provide suffi- cient reources to cater to the different language needs of such mixed kindergarten groups, in order to allow for some separate teaching of L1 minority language children as well as for integration with L2 learners. These separate teaching periods allow for more linguistically challeng- ing activities such as story-telling, drama, and discussion among the L1 children. There needs to be discussion with *naíonra* leaders about the value of taking L1 speakers

separately at regular intervals for these more advanced linguistic activities if the staff are available. Otherwise, grouping them together for additional short periods before or after the *naíonra* session, or for one morning a week (many *naíonraí* operate only four days a week), would make full use of the resources of leaders and accommodation. This approach would be more practical than attempt- ing to set up separate groups for L1speakers and L2learners, especially since the numbers in each group are small and fluctuate from year to year. Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of allocating at least some separate time to the L1 speakers in each group, scheduled as additional periods either apart from the main group or during the main *naíonra* session, while the other children are engaged. However, such arrangements would need to be discussed fully with all *naíonra* parents to stress the aim of targeting the real needs of the L1 children, thereby increasing their use of Irish, with likely benefits for all of the children in the *naíonra.*
At present, the *naíonraí* operate without an official curriculum, as a result of the strong emphasis since their founding on promoting play and exploration by children. The data collected on work planning in the *naíonraí* (Hickey, 1997; Hickey & 6Cainin, in press) showed a concen- tration on daily and weekly planning with a dearth of planning for the term and year. This can result in a lack of focus and progression and an over-attention to the more obvious needs of the majority in the group. Clearly, it would be desirable to develop a general curriculum with graded objectives for the different language ability groups, such as in the Language Focused Curriculum developed for the Language Acquisition Pre-schools (see Bunce, 1995; Rice & Wilcox, 1995). Exami- nation of methods of mother tongue pre-schools to promote later L1 development would be beneficial, as would exploration of concepts such as syllabus 'deepening' and 'broadening' used In relation to the needs of gifted children in mainstream schools.

With regard to work organization, Wong Fillmore (1985, 1991c) stresses the importance of taking into account the language balance within a particular group, and advocates flexibility in work planning in order to adapt to different balances in different classrooms. She argues that, where the majority of children are L2 learners, there is a need to maximize input from the leader, since she is their main source of target language learning input. Children who are sufficiently competent in the target language to speak it among themselves may have a different balance between teacher-led activities and activities with peers if they are supported by being grouped with other L1speakers regularly. Thus, support for the target language requires intervention beyond the teacher-student(s) interaction in order to promote use of that language between children as well. This requires a :;hift in focus from de facto prioritization of L2 learning to· give equal regard to promoting L1 maintenance and enrichment. In an earlier study (1999), I explored some of

the strategies to achieve these objectives, including grouping Irish L1 children togethef for particular tasks or periods; discussing language· use in the *naíonra* to clarify that Irish production will elicit praise; and making greater use of language-centred activities such as story-telling, drama, and puppets to involve the children in speaking the target language together.

Some *naíonra* leaders expressed reluctance to discuss language use explicitly with these pre-school children, on the grounds that they were learning their L2 naturally and may not know the names of the two linguistic systems involved. Providing those names might, however, be beneficial, but even without the terms it is possible to discuss language choice with young children by using TV characters as exemplars for the languages and by exploring their awareness that they will be praised in the *naíonra* for speaking Irish like Hiudai, for example (an Irish- language cartoon character on TV), rather than English like Barney the Dinosaur.

Naturally, L2 learners cannot be penalized for speaking English instead of Irish during the early stages of acquisition, but neither should minority language use by the Irish L1 children be taken for granted or seen only as an aid to the L2 learners. Given the differences in status between the two languages, every support for minority language use in . mixed ability groups is significant.

Conclusion

It is clear that a balance must be achieved between addressing the language needs of L2 learners and the equally urgent needs of L1 minority language children for active language support and enrichment. There is a need for proactive intervention to ensure that attempts to enlarge the pool of 12 learners of Irish do not short-change the L1 speakers, who need language maintenance. An increase in state in- vestment is required to develop intervention and organizational strategies to promote L1 minority language maintenance and enrichment, as well as 12 learning in the *naíonraí.* The future of minority languages is critically dependent on not only raising competence in the language among 12 learners, but also on maintaining and promoting its use by L1 speakers and between L1 and 12 children. It could be argued that, in the case of state-supported minority languages such as Irish, 12 learners, like the poor, are always with us. Unfortunately, the same assumption cannot be made about young L1 speakers of minority languages.

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FIGURE 1
Mean number of Irish utterances by home background and *naíonra* type

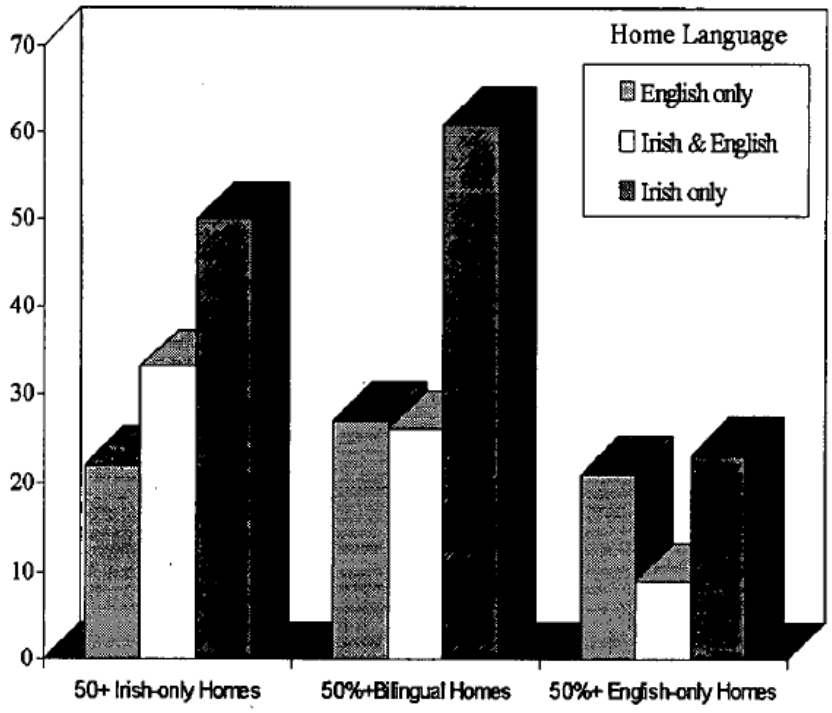


TABLE 1

Language mix within *Gaeltacht nafonraf*

Gaeltacht nafonrafin which:	Percentage (N= 55)
50%+ of children were L1 Irish speakers	20
50%+ of children were bilingual	29
50%+ of children were L2 learners of Irish	40
Other mix (not reaching 50% in any category) Total	11

TABLE 2
Mean percentage of Irish utterances by home language and language mix in group

Home language	*Naíonra* group with: Majority L1 Irish-speakers (n = 18)	Majority bilinguals (n = 24)	Marjority L2 learners (n = 17)	*M* (n = 59)
Irish only (n = 20)	48	60	47	52
Irish and English (n = 23)	43	36	16	34
English only (n = 16)	22	28	18	23
Mean	44	42	24	37

TABLE 3
Target children's talk

Target children in *naíonra* talking to:	30-second periods (N = 3,892)
Leader/Assistant Leader	23%
Other child or children	18%
Themselves ('private speech')	24%
Silent	35%