



# IS NAMHAID DON CHEIRD GAN Í A FHOGHLAIM

A REPORT ON THE LINGUISTIC AWARENESS OF IMMERSION SECTOR PRACTITIONERS

## **Executive summary**

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## Executive summary

Andrews (2003), Lindahl (2016) and Ní Chathasaigh & Ó Ceallaigh (2021) postulate that the linguistic competence of immersion teachers has a significant impact on their ability to be effective conduits for L2 learning. The educational and linguistic outcomes of immersion students are not only dependent on the teachers' ability to find the balance between linguistic instruction and normal curricular development but on their ability to function as language role-models, as language mediators, as language assessors and as linguistic input providers in the classroom. Within the confines of individual schools, the school ethos, school management, classroom support and the wider school community all impact on whether a school has a culture and skills base conducive to effective L2 learning. The vision, policy and support offered by DE and EA does, of course, directly impact the ability of schools and individual practitioners to realise the full potential of these aspiring bilingual students.

The majority of practitioners in IM schools are themselves L2 learners, living and working in a largely monolingual society and employed in an education system, which unsurprisingly, has been designed for the language of the majority. It is therefore no criticism of the ability, professionalism nor dedication of these practitioners to state that their linguistic awareness, in terms of their own linguistic performance and their knowledge of language pedagogy, is a professional skill, and just like any other skill possessed by effective practitioners, it must be cultivated over time. The key to this lies in initial training and in CPD (TPL).

To design and implement effective linguistic training, we must first survey and analyse the gaps in knowledge and specific barriers to self-improvement currently extant in the sector. It is prudent to take stock of current practices and training opportunities while comparing these to experiences and research findings in other jurisdictions.

In response to this, and in light of recommendations in *A Fair Start Policy Document*, which states "DE should provide additional focused support for the Irish Medium sector in the form of educational resources, Initial Teacher Education, TPL and leadership training" the following project was funded by DE. The research was conducted amongst a sample of practitioners, in a sample of IM schools in the Northern Ireland between November and March 2023 using questionnaire, interview and focus group data.

This report contains a combination of desk research and field research which aims to better our understanding of the baseline competency profile within the sector. Amongst areas covered are initial language training, language culture of schools, language use, attitudes and confidence amongst practitioners, classroom practices including Content and Language Interrelated Learning (CLIL) and language training needs. A set of competency tests, benchmarked to the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) has been created so that leaders and individual practitioners can baseline their linguistic competency. A self-assessment tool has been created for individual practitioners so they can identify their training needs and be signposted to available training opportunities. Finally, school leaders, CnaG, EA, and DE are provided with recommendations as to how linguistic profiles could be strengthened in schools while detail is given on bespoke training programmes that need to be designed to bridge the current gaps in provision.

## **Main findings**

In IM settings, positive educational outcomes are inextricably linked to successful cultivation of L2 competency. Effective pedagogy in an immersion setting can only be truly effective if the teacher can productively and confidently engage with the learning through the target language of instruction. An ability to speak the language should not be regarded as the sole criteria for linguistic success - one must focus on linguistic awareness in a broader sense. All teachers in IM settings, no matter what subject, must strive to be proficient language users, language analysts and language tutors.

In addition, a student's success in both acquiring and learning L2 is impacted by more than just the teacher. Classroom assistants play a pivotal role in this development, as do school leaders who are charged with creating a culture and vision of language and educational excellence. For this reason, this research speaks of practitioners as opposed to solely teachers in order to analyse the linguistic influences on students more fully.

### **- Initial training**

#### **Varied pathways with a varied focus on linguistic competence**

No native *Gaeltacht* speakers were found amongst the respondents. Although not surprising, it highlights that even the most linguistically competent in the sector are, in fact, learners of the language. This is neither a criticism nor a cause for concern but speaks to the fact that IM

practitioners are themselves on a language learning journey which doesn't stop when employed in the IM sector.

There are a range of pathways through which practitioners come to be employed in the sector and these pathways have a direct impact on their linguistic awareness and confidence. Some teachers have specialized in Irish, therefore, have had focussed linguistic training. Others have studied courses with a linguistic element. On the face of it, these courses provide the required linguistic training, however, on analysis, the training is neither continual, intense nor focussed on all areas of linguistic awareness. At the other end of the scale, we have teachers who specialize in a subject other than Irish and who have had no genuine linguistic training. In teaching programmes, such as the PGCE, emphasis, unsurprisingly, is on generic teaching skills with focus on IM teaching very much dependent on the chosen course. 100% of leaders and 69% of teachers surveyed attest to a lack of linguistic training in current courses; 100% of leaders and 39% of teachers claim a lack of emphasis on language pedagogies. 42% of teachers state that they weren't confident in their linguistic abilities on graduating and 54% state that they were not confident to teach the language.

Reported confidence in language abilities amongst classroom assistants is high (74%), with 67% of respondents claiming they are confident in their ability to explain the language to others. This is surprising given that there is a wide variety of qualifications amongst them. This ranges from those who have only GCSE level qualifications to those who have degrees in Irish and other subjects. There is no clear specialised qualification needed to undertake this role with many having achieved their qualifications while already employed.

#### - **Language culture of schools**

##### **Strong commitment to Irish but no unified approach**

In light of findings, there can be no doubt as to the commitment of schools, units and Irish language streams to linguistic excellence. Proficiency in Irish is a pre-requisite for employment; however, this isn't normally tested formally with the majority of decisions being based on qualifications or limited interview questions in the language.

The language ethos, vision and approach of schools is encapsulated in the school's language policy. Each school who responded does have a language policy and 60% of leaders claim to discuss it with new recruits. However, this doesn't concur with the views the staff, as 45% of teachers and classroom assistants surveyed claim that it wasn't discussed with them.

54% of teachers and 84% of classroom assistants state that they were not given a mentor in the beginning and although some claim that their questions were answered and that advice was available, many state that they had to learn as they went due to other staff being too busy to offer mentorship, including linguistic support.

- **Language ability, use and confidence**

**Continuum of abilities and confidence**

As could be expected, given that they are working in an immersion environment, 65% of teachers assess themselves highly proficient (C2) or advanced (C1) in accordance with the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR), while 63% of assistants claim C1/C2 level. Notwithstanding that, 81% of teachers and 74% of assistants claim that although fairly confident, they feel they could improve on their linguistic abilities. Over 80% of both state that other practitioners in their schools have a satisfactory level of Irish but suggest that the ability level varies amongst them. 77% of leaders, 74% of teachers and 79% of assistants claim that there are members of the classroom staff who struggle with their linguistic confidence while 42% of the teachers and 58% of the assistants questioned admit to having some difficulty in dealing with parts of the curriculum through Irish.

With regard to specific linguistic challenges, using correct grammar in spoken and written Irish are the most-cited difficulties across the board while 52% of assistants claim to struggle with vocabulary. There are a range of other challenges reported including the ability to explain rules, understanding the difference between standard and dialectal Irish and understanding unfamiliar Irish.

92% of teaching staff surveyed have to create their own Irish resources and 58% of classroom assistants have to write in Irish which suggests that a high-level ability in the language is required. Most respondents claim that there is a spirit of co-operation and peer-review, but this doesn't seem to be the culture across the board and depends on the staff involved and the time available for this. 63% of classroom assistants claim they would correct a colleague's error if they noticed it while 60% of leaders and 68% of teachers state that this would depend on the person and the personality.

- **Classroom practice**

**Lack of knowledge of language pedagogy and CLIL**

80% of all respondents accept that practitioner ability has an impact on the linguistic outcome of students. Content and Language Integrated Learning is recognised (CLIL) as an effective means of bringing language learning into all subjects across the curriculum and one secondary school is

undertaking a promising pilot programme in this regard. However, 69% of teachers claim to have no knowledge or little knowledge of this approach while this rises to 84% amongst classroom assistants. 60% of leaders believe that explicit teaching of language is the best approach while 54% of teachers and 53% of assistants believe a blended approach to be most effective with 92% of all respondents noting that a balance needs to be found between teaching content and teaching language.

#### - **Training needs**

##### **Justifiable linguistic training needs and practical barriers to TPL/CPD**

Interest in additional training is high, however, although 80% of leaders claim that staff are offered regular training opportunities, over 60% of teachers and 68% of assistants questioned claim that they aren't offered sufficient opportunities with 62% of teachers 42% of assistants claiming that the conversation seldom happens.

Over 50% of teachers and assistants claim that they are not aware of the training offered by EA and a large majority of both are not aware of the materials available on the new IM Hub created by EA. There is an opinion that linguistic training doesn't figure highly in EA's training programmes and most agree that they are either not aware of available training opportunities or that they are difficult to find. The reported barriers to training are spread fairly evenly between finding the time, covering the cost, actually being motivated to complete the work and finding suitable courses.

Interest was expressed in a variety of courses with the most sought-after being language enrichment courses, courses on language correctness and courses on teaching grammar with accredited courses being taught face-to-face on site (59%) being strongly favoured followed by asynchronous courses (29%).

### **Conclusion**

The findings emphasise the need to avoid assuming high language awareness based solely on reported ability or qualifications. The linguistic landscape amongst teachers and classroom assistants is varied and understanding practitioners' linguistic backgrounds, learning path and confidence levels is crucial, as they directly influence competencies within and between schools. Language skills require continual nurturing, support and mentorship, with practitioners and leaders actively monitoring their own linguistic attainment. This needs to be underpinned by clear policy and guidance to ensure that practitioners are aware of their role as language role models.

Furthermore, the report highlights the significant impact of practitioners' language competency and the overall language culture in schools on students' linguistic outcomes. Currently, there is a lack of

awareness and expertise in implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) effectively. The report also identifies the need for improved strategies for peer-feedback and review and for offering corrective linguistic feedback and this can be achieved through gaining a greater understanding of their role as linguistic analysts and teachers.

Where appropriate, initial training providers should re-assess their emphasis on language competence and language pedagogies. Those already qualified and employed agree that there is a need for improvement and suggest a willingness to undertake training. However, insufficient language-specific training coupled with practical barriers and competing priorities, underscores the urgency for a novel approach to training focusing on creating bespoke IM courses based on actual need rather than assumptions of need.

## **Recommendations**

Individual practitioners, school leaders and EA must show greater cognizance of the importance of language competency in the broader sense as explained in this report. Generic teaching skills are of course vitally important, and EA works hard in that regard, but linguistic competence is a pre-requisite for practitioner competence in this sector so cannot be ignored. Complacency, competing priorities, a lack of suitable opportunities and the perceived barriers to TPL/CPD can result in a laissez-faire, ad hoc, piecemeal approach to linguistic development. Mediocrity in terms of linguistic competence can, as shown, impact directly on the linguistic outcomes of students who rely heavily on the linguistic input offered through the whole-school community.

Linguistic development starts in pre-service training; therefore, it is strongly recommended that aspiring IM practitioners are made aware of the importance of the extra skill set needed to be a successful in the sector. They should, where possible, choose 3rd level providers whose courses contain a strong focus on linguistic proficiency, declarative knowledge of language and language pedagogy. These providers, when creating curricula, need to understand the implications of language learners becoming language role-models and provide the space within courses to give trainees the solid linguistic base from which generic teaching skills can be learnt and then implemented in the classroom.

School leaders and individual practitioners currently working in the sector should help foster a culture of linguistic excellence in their schools, adding to and drawing on best-practice already available in the sector and elsewhere as detailed in the report. They should use the evaluation tools made available in this report to baseline linguistic abilities and confidence within their schools. For

those members of staff who require linguistic development, there should be clear signposts to extant training opportunities and provisions made to mitigate the barriers to undertaking additional training.

As well as providing clear, accredited pathways for linguistic development, EA must also work with CnaG and 3rd level institutions to design bespoke courses and opportunities for linguistic training, based on the evidence of this report. Complete 3rd level programmes are the gold standard in this regard; however, these must be flexible and subsidized to allow practitioners to actually avail of them. For those who are not at that level, other available programmes can place them on this pathway. In the short term, concise, focused, recognised courses should be designed and piloted on site with online expansion material and backup where appropriate.