



A Second Chance at Secondary School? The Challenges and Opportunities of Late Immersion Education in Ireland

Hilary Ní Chonchubhair^{1,*}

¹*School of Education, University College Cork, Ireland.*

* *Corresponding author: hilary.nichonchubhair@ucc.ie*

At a Glance

The transition from primary to post-primary education is a significant milestone in one's education. Learners grapple with a new identity and physical environment, a wider range of subjects and teaching styles, and must adjust to new expectations. While pre-transition anxieties often fade, difficulties during this period can lead to longer term educational issues. In Ireland, some learners face an additional challenge during this transition: the shift in the language of their schooling. This paper explores the transition of students who opt to commence immersion education for the very first time at post-primary level, accessing the curriculum through the medium of Irish.

Keywords: Transition, Education, Immersion education, Language acquisition, Educational transition

Introduction

The transition from primary to post-primary education can be a complex time for adolescents. Learners undergo an identity shift, moving from the most established group in primary school to the youngest and newest as they commence first year at second level. They grapple with a longer school day, a new physical environment, much larger and more complex to navigate than the base classroom they came to know in sixth class under the continuous care of one teacher. Now they must adjust to new norms, expectations and multiple teaching styles, while following a complex timetable and studying a wide range of subjects. However, for some learners in Ireland, there is an additional, significant shift. This paper explores the transition of learners who opt to commence immersion education for the very first time at post-primary level i.e. late immersion. Immersion education involves the regular school curriculum being delivered

through another language, in this case, Irish. For these learners, Irish replaces English as the language of instruction, communication and socialisation as they commence post-primary school. This paper will provide an introduction to Irish-medium education (IME) in Ireland, the benefits and challenges of late immersion, and rationale for its selection.

Immersion Education: An Overview

Immersion education has been described as a planned programme aimed at bilingual development. Students receive at least half of their subject-matter instruction through the medium of a language that they are learning as a second, foreign, heritage, or indigenous language.¹ In 1937, the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann) designated Irish as “the first official language” of the Republic of Ireland, while English was recognised as “a second official language”. Today, Ireland recognises Irish, English and Irish Sign Language (since the Irish Sign Language Act, 2017) as official languages. Schools in Irish-speaking areas (*Gaeltachtaí*) have Gaeltacht status and provide Irish-medium education (IME). However, schooling is provided in both English and Irish outside of the Gaeltacht also. Irish-medium primary schools are known as *Gaelscoileanna* and Irish-medium post-primary provision is available via a *Gaelcholáiste* (Irish-medium post-primary school), *Aonad lán-Ghaeilge* (Irish-medium unit delivering the curriculum through Irish but operating under the management of an English-medium host school) or *Sruth* (Irish-medium stream where some subjects are offered through the medium of Irish within an English-medium host school).

The Department of Education and Youth recently launched its Policy for Irish-Medium Education outside of the Gaeltacht, providing key insight into IME provision and uptake in the Republic of Ireland. Outside the Gaeltacht, 151 primary schools and 45 post-primary schools offer IME, with 6.8% of pupils attending IME primary schools and 2.9% attending IME post-primary schools.²

Late Immersion

Late immersion is a bilingual education model where learners begin to receive instruction in a second language at a later stage in their education following years of schooling in their first language.^{3,4} In their study of continuity in immersion education, Ó Duibhir et al.⁵ discovered that 76%-100% of learners have attended a *Gaelscoil* in the majority of Irish-medium post-primary schools but also reported less than 50% of *Gaelscoil* pupils in some post-primary settings. Those who have not attended a *Gaelscoil* and have only studied Irish as a compulsory subject of the primary curriculum are known as late immersion learners⁶ i.e., they have a later entry point to immersion education than their peers who attended a *Gaelscoil*. The significant difference in exposure to the language in primary school causes a language proficiency gap; some students transitioning to first year will have completed their entire primary schooling through Irish while others will only have studied Irish for three hours per week, according to the suggested time allocation of the primary curriculum for 3rd-6th class.

The Challenges and Benefits of Late Immersion

Some benefits of late immersion are reported by prominent researchers such as Jim Cummins e.g. cognitive maturity and the ability to develop reading and writing skills to the same standard as their early immersion peers. This success is attributed to the significant development of their learning strategies and literacy skills in English by the time they finish primary school.⁷ However, the challenges may be seen to outweigh the benefits of late immersion. Due to the significant difference in language exposure in primary school, the language proficiency gap is considerable.⁸ There are fewer resources available that are suitable for both the age profile and ability of the late immersion learner⁹ i.e. more basic resources are available but are targeted at a much younger cohort which may be unappealing and unsuited to the adolescent learner. Immersion teachers must continue with the content of their curriculum and while this is true in all immersion contexts, the complex balancing of language and content would be even more challenging with the proficiency gap evident in late immersion. For example, a geography teacher in an IME setting already has to strike the balance between covering the geography curriculum, teaching complex, technical terminology and ensuring language accuracy in Irish. Subject teachers would require advanced language teaching skills to differentiate the learning for late immersion learners. No formal additional funding is available to support late immersion and generally, early and late immersion learners are placed in the same classes. Early immersion is far more common than late immersion in the Republic of Ireland.

Most late immersion learners are likely to have developed limited basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in Irish in primary school i.e. social language, whereas their early immersion peers will have significantly greater fluency along with more advanced cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). This allows them to access more complex content across the range of post-primary subjects with much greater ease. The limited BICS of the late immersion learner pose challenges regarding meaningful access to the curriculum. Furthermore, as Irish is both the instructional and social language of the immersion school, there may be implications for the development of social and interpersonal relationships; a vital aspect of the transition to post-primary school. Experts state that it may take children with no prior instruction or no support in native language development seven years to develop CALP. Additional language support should be provided to the late immersion learner, but schools often do not have the resources to provide such specialised interventions.

High levels of motivation, effort and self-confidence are also required to bridge the language proficiency gap between early and late immersion.¹⁰ However, school choice is often made by the parent/guardian and without experiencing IME at primary level, they may not understand the demands required to access an entire curriculum of new subject matter through a second language.

While motivation, effort and self-confidence may fluctuate, a learner's age does not. The critical period hypothesis first proposed by Penfield and Roberts states that there is a limited

developmental period for optimal language acquisition, typically ending around puberty; precisely when a late immersion learner would be starting their immersion education journey.¹¹ However, in more recent literature, this hypothesis has been questioned and challenged, and age is widely accepted as only one of many contributing factors to successful language learning.

Parent/Guardian Choice

The role of the parent/guardian in education is widely recognised as a key factor for children's academic and social success at school. Parent/guardian involvement can impact learners' motivation, reading attainment, behaviour, attendance and overall academic achievement.¹² While the disadvantages may seem to outweigh the advantages, at least linguistically, some parents/guardians choose to pursue late immersion for their child. *Gaeloideachas*, a national, voluntary organisation founded in 1973 to support the development of Irish-medium education, highlights some of the benefits of immersion education: understandings of multiculturalism, increased educational attainment with bonus marks allocated in the Leaving Certificate examination, and higher levels of creativity, concentration and self-esteem. However, having a child educated through a language that is not the first language of the parent/guardian presents difficulties relating to effective involvement in education. Parents/guardians of late immersion learners have not had the opportunity to engage with the supports and services provided in the primary IME space and less services are available at post-primary level. This correlates with lower levels of language learning among post-primary parents/guardians.¹³ Simply put, as welcoming and attractive as it may be, the Irish-medium post-primary school is unfamiliar territory for all involved in late immersion. Why is late immersion still chosen in the face of these challenges? Learnings from international contexts, particularly Canada (French) and Wales (Cymraeg) provide some insight. Attachment to one's native language aside, reasons for selection of late immersion in Canada appear to vary by social class. Those from middle-class backgrounds opt for late immersion for communication purposes, while those from working-class backgrounds select late immersion for improved employment opportunities.¹⁴ Ultimately, late immersion is seen to provide greater opportunities on school completion. It is important to note that while it may seem like an obvious solution to simply send a child to a *Gaelscoil* and thus engage in early immersion, it cannot be assumed that one is always accessible, geographically or otherwise.

Conclusion

While a minority within the greater immersion education community in Ireland, this research aims to highlight the complex needs of late immersion learners who commit to IME despite many obstacles. The next phase of this research aims to create a profile of needs for this community, informing the design and provision of suitable resources and supports to allow better access to, and participation in immersion education. While the challenges in terms of lan-

guage acquisition are clear, perhaps late immersion needs to be looked at through a wider lens, acknowledging its positive influence on cultural and linguistic awareness. Findings from the Department of Education's consultation for the policy on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht highlight the denial of access to IME for some families due to a lack of suitable provision.¹⁵ Late immersion will remain an option irrespective of provision, although its prevalence could be either reduced or better supported with increased investment in IME. Late immersion should be acknowledged in such policies as a recognised learning pathway to ensure IME is inclusive and accessible to all.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Nicola Ingram and Dr. Diarmuid Lester for their encouragement and guidance, and An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) for their funding and support of this doctoral research. Míle buíochas.

Declaration of Interests

Nothing to declare.

Author Bio

Hilary is a second-year doctoral student and lecturer at the School of Education, UCC. Her research explores the transition from primary to post-primary education, specifically of those transitioning from English-medium to Irish-medium instruction at post-primary level. Hilary was awarded a bursary by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) to pursue this research. She currently works across a number of Initial Teacher Education programmes at the School, acting as placement coordinator for the BEd Gaeilge programme and lecturing in areas such as language pedagogy, teacher professionalism, curriculum and assessment.

References

- ¹ R. Lyster and F. Genesee. Immersion education. *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*, 1-6, 2012.
- ² Department of Education and Youth. Policy for Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht. *Government of Ireland*, 2025.
- ³ J. Cummins. *California State Department of Education (Ed.), Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Rationale*, chapter The Role of Primary Language Development in Promoting Educational Success for Language Minority Students. Los Angeles, CA: California State University, 1981.
- ⁴ F. Genesee. *Learning through two languages: Studies of immersion and bilingual education*. Newbury House Publishers, New York, 1987.
- ⁵ P. Ó Duibhir, G. NigUídhir, Ó. Cathalláin, L. Ní Thuairisg, and J. Cosgrove. An analysis of models of provision for Irish-medium education. *Foras na Gaeilge*, 2017.
- ⁶ J. Ó Muircheartaigh and T. Hickey. Academic Outcome, Anxiety and Attitudes in Early and Late Immersion in Ireland. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 11:558–576, 2008.

- ⁷ R. M. Johnstone. Addressing 'the age factor': some implications for languages policy. Technical report, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2002.
- ⁸ R. K. Johnson and M. Swain. From core to content: Bridging the L2 proficiency gap in late immersion. *Journal of Digital Imaging*, 8:211–229, 1994.
- ⁹ D. Singleton and L. Ryan. Language Acquisition: The Age Factor. *Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters*, 2004.
- ¹⁰ D. Singleton. *Language acquisition: The age factor*. Multilingual Matters, 1989.
- ¹¹ W. Penfield and L. Roberts. *Speech and Brain Mechanisms*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- ¹² L. Kavanagh and T. M. Hickey. 'You're looking at this different language and it freezes you out straight away': identifying challenges to parental involvement among immersion parents. *Language and Education*, 27:432–450, 2012.
- ¹³ G. Nig Uidhir and Ó. Cathalláin. Tuismitheoirí ina ngníomhairí in earnáil an Ghaeloideachais. *COMHAR Taighde*, 10, 2016.
- ¹⁴ J. Makropoulos. Gaining Access to Late French-Immersion Programs: Class-Based Perspectives of Canadian Students in an Ottawa High School. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 32:317–330, 2009.
- ¹⁵ Department of Education. Summary of policy proposals for Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht. *Government of Ireland*, 2023.