



Irish in the Primary School

Inspectorate Evaluation Studies



PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING



AN RÓINN
OIDEACHAIS
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SCIENCE

INSPECTORATE

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Foreword

I welcome this comprehensive report on the standards of Irish in primary schools. A substantially changed curriculum for Irish and accompanying guidelines for teachers were published in 1999 as part of the revised *Primary School Curriculum*. This report, based on detailed inspections in forty schools and observations in 159 classrooms during 2005, provides an analysis of the extent to which the aims of the revised curriculum are being achieved in schools.

The report acknowledges that some progress has been made by teachers and schools in gradually engaging with the changes in the *Primary School Curriculum*. However, it is also evident from the report that significant challenges remain for all of us who have responsibility for improving the standards of Irish in the education system.

I believe that this report raises several issues that need to be considered by teachers and schools, by colleges and those involved in the initial and continuing professional development of teachers, as well as school support services and the Department of Education and Science. I hope that the report will be a valuable resource for policy discussion and action in classrooms, schools and throughout the education system.



Gearóid Ó Conluain
Deputy Chief Inspector



Chapter 1

Introduction



1.1 The structure of the Irish curriculum

The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999) was circulated to primary teachers in September 1999. The curriculum is presented in areas of learning, some of which are further subdivided into subjects.

The Irish curriculum is presented in two volumes: a *Curriculum Statement* and *Guidelines for Teachers*. The teaching and learning content of the curriculum is presented in strands for each of four class levels: junior and senior infants, first and second classes, third and fourth classes, and fifth and sixth classes.

The curriculum provides for Irish as the first language in Gaeltacht schools and in scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge (Irish medium schools). These schools are referred to in the curriculum as T1 schools. English is the first language in most schools, and in these schools pupils learn Irish as a second language or as an additional language. These schools are referred to as T2 schools. The design of the Irish curriculum facilitates a structure that provides specific objectives for each of the two school types.

1.2 The curriculum strands

The teaching and learning content of the Irish curriculum is outlined in four strands:

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing.

Since the emphasis in the language classes during the early years is on the development of understanding and listening skills, the *Listening* and *Speaking* strands underpin the curriculum for the infant and junior classes. In the middle and senior classes, the programme is extended and pupils' receptive and expressive language skills are developed through all four strands.

The curriculum objectives describe the learning experiences of the pupils. These specific objectives clarify the skills that pupils will develop in each of the four strands. All four strands are further subdivided into three strand units namely (a) developing an interest in language, (b) using language, and (c) understanding language. It is recommended in the curriculum that the strands would not be taught as discrete elements but that opportunities should be provided for pupils to develop language skills and content by integrating the four strands.

1.2.1 Listening

The curriculum acknowledges the importance of listening in underpinning the development of oral language. Listening is a receptive skill that provides for the development of the production of language. In regard to Irish, the school is important in creating opportunities to develop pupils' listening skills.

Listening is a specific skill that needs to be developed systematically. In the *Primary School Curriculum* a particular emphasis is placed on the formal development of listening. The repertoire of skills that pupils need to develop while engaging in listening activities includes internalising the sounds of the language, gaining a sense of the rhythm and structure of the language and developing an understanding of the content of the language. Intonation and context are central to the development of these skills. It is expected that schools provide opportunities for the structured development of listening skills. Schools should promote their use in the informal language contexts of the classroom especially when managing the pupils and in the language expressions used when praising pupils or giving directions. The challenge for teachers is to organise activities that allow pupils to acquire these competences with ease. Activities such as the daily recitation and narration of stories, rhymes and poems are particularly helpful in this context.

1.2.2 Speaking

The main purpose of the Irish curriculum is the development of the natural use of the spoken language in communication. The curriculum emphasises the importance of enjoyment for pupils when they are learning Irish and it recommends that pupils have access to a wide range of activities including games, language tasks, rhymes, poems, rhythmical songs, word play, tongue-twisters and drama to support the development of a positive attitude to Irish. The curriculum recommends a particular structure for the Irish lesson so that the lesson can be as communicative as possible. This structure encompasses three phases within the lesson. During the pre-communicative phase the teacher provides a new language input. The communicative phase involves the organisation of tasks and social interaction so that pupils can experience using the language they have learned to communicate authentically with each other. During the post-communicative phase the teacher evaluates the language used by the pupils and ensures that they understand it and that they are able to use it in different contexts.

The teacher is expected to use Irish as the language of instruction and communication during the lesson, and is also expected to use appropriate materials and repetition to ensure that pupils can internalise the meaning of the language. It is recommended in the curriculum that the contexts created for oral work are as communicative as possible and that the emphasis during this period is on learning and on the correct use of language. These practices enable pupils to develop the confidence to master phrases and structures that they require to engage authentically with each other during the communicative period.

1.2.3 Reading

The curriculum states that reading is a very important aspect of learning Irish. The teaching of reading begins formally in second class and pupils at this stage have already had a few years' experience of developing their reading skills in English before they commence reading in Irish. An understanding of the Irish language is developed during the work on listening skills and pupils are motivated to read by having stories read to them and by becoming familiar with various types of written texts available in the classroom.

It is acknowledged that specific sub-skills and strategies are associated with the development of reading. In order to develop pupils' ability to engage with Irish reading, emphasis is placed on teaching the sounds in Irish and the structure of the language. Pupils also require a wide range of vocabulary and an understanding of the flow of the language. Emphasis is also placed on higher-order reading skills, for example, extracting meaning from the text, accessing information from the reading matter, predicting new words from the context or the structure, using the title to predict the story, or comparing the predicted story with the actual story.

1.2.4 Writing

The curriculum acknowledges that writing is a communicative activity. A good foundation in language is required if one is to achieve a high standard of writing. An ability to spell as well as an understanding of the difference between sound units and letters, in other words the difference between the sound itself and the written symbol that is used to represent that sound, are required. In addition to a basic vocabulary the writer must be able to competently manage the language structures. To achieve a high standard the writer must have a sense of the written language in a social context and must write for a range of audiences. It is accepted of course that, in regard to Irish, this context is very limited, and that pupils seldom see written Irish in social settings in their immediate environment. The school, therefore, continues to be the main context whereby pupils have opportunities to connect with written Irish, unlike the other main languages in use today. The absence of this visual context influences pupils' experience of literacy.

The curriculum suggests that pupils will write for different audiences and in different genres. Functional and creative writing should be undertaken with pupils from second class onwards in T2 schools. Opportunities are provided for pupils to draft and redraft texts so that their writing skills are developed and extended.

1.2.5 The content and themes in the curriculum

The child and his/her interests are the starting point for the teacher when selecting the content of the lesson. It is most important, therefore, that the contexts created for the use of the language are based on the pupils' lives and that they are actively engaged in the tasks they undertake. The curriculum identifies ten themes that reflect the learning context for pupils and the development of the language functions. These themes are based on pupils' experiences, and they are: myself, home, school, food, television, shopping, pastimes, clothes, weather and special occasions.

1.3 Support for curriculum implementation

The Department of Education and Science devised a range of initiatives and programmes to support the phased implementation of the curriculum in all primary schools. In 2001/2 and 2002/3 teachers were provided with in-service seminars on the Irish curriculum and these were facilitated by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP). The seminars provided an introduction to the content and methodologies of the curriculum and teachers were presented with opportunities to engage in activities that illustrated changes in teaching approaches. Whole-school planning days were provided for schools to plan for and implement the curricular changes at individual school level. Student teachers in the colleges of education also received preservice training in the methodologies of the curriculum.

The School Development Planning Support (SDPS) advisers assisted schools in the whole-school planning process. Templates for planning that could be used in the school and in the classroom were available on the PCSP and on the SDPS websites. The Regional Curriculum Support Service *cuiditheoirí* (advisers) visited schools and advised teachers on the implementation of the Irish curriculum and provided useful sources of information in relation to resources and teaching materials. These support services (PCSP and SDPS) were intended to provide clarification, reinforcement and reiteration of many of the key messages delivered on the in-service days.

1.4 Time scale for implementation

In general, the implementation of each curriculum area in schools began in the year following the completion of the familiarisation programme, and each new subject was phased in over a two-year cycle. Circular 40/03 (DES, 2003) outlined the schedule for the planning and implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum*. It stated: “During the first year the focus will be on initial implementation and the advancement of planning which began during the period of preparation organised by PCSP. In the second year, the focus will be on substantially completing plans and consolidating implementation.” Therefore according to Circular 40/03, the Department of Education and Science anticipated that in 2003/4 schools were completing their whole-school plans in Irish and consolidating the implementation of the Irish curriculum by the end of that school year.

1.5 Review and evaluation of curriculum implementation

The external evaluation of the implementation of the Irish curriculum was conducted in schools in 2005 at a period when it was expected that schools were fully implementing the curriculum. This report describes the quality of implementation of the Irish curriculum in schools where Irish was the second language of instruction and learning (T2). The report draws attention to both good practices evident in our primary schools and the challenges relating to the teaching of Irish.

1.6 Evaluation objectives

The purpose of conducting this evaluation was to report on the teaching and learning of Irish in T2 schools. The research objectives focused on providing a multifaceted report on Irish that included information on:

- the quality of teaching in Irish
- the quality of learning in Irish.



An associated objective of the evaluation was to make recommendations to support the implementation of the Irish curriculum and to guide the Department of Education and Science and its agencies.

1.7 Selection of schools

Forty schools were selected from those schools listed for inspection during the school year 2004-05. These schools were informed that a review of the implementation of the Irish curriculum and of one other subject (English or Mathematics) would be conducted. Different school types were included in the sample of schools: single sex and co-educational schools, urban and rural schools, large schools and small schools.

Table 1.1: School types selected for the evaluation

School type	Number of schools
Urban school	17
Rural school	19
Disadvantaged school (urban)	4

1.8 Aspects of the evaluation

This report is based on the following research activities:

- An evaluation of the implementation of the Irish curriculum was conducted in mainstream classrooms in forty schools. An evaluation of one other subject (English or Mathematics) was also conducted in each school.
- Principals completed an information form.
- Structured interviews were conducted with school principals and the following whole-school issues were discussed: practices in relation to school planning, curriculum provision, assessment and attainment, and support for professional development. The discussion gave principals an opportunity to give their opinions on aspects of the curriculum that were working well, and on the challenges evident to them in other areas.
- Class teachers completed a short questionnaire in which they were asked their opinions on the strand units in the curriculum, the supports available to them during the implementation phase, and those aspects of the curriculum that pupils found enjoyable.
- The number of pupils who received exemptions from Irish was examined as well as the provision the school was making for these pupils during the time allocated to Irish.
- School planning documents for Irish were reviewed, as were planning documents of individual teachers, assessment policies and information on pupils' achievement.
- Inspectors engaged with pupils in classes to assess what they had learned.

In small schools all classes were included in the evaluation. In larger schools, five or six classes were randomly selected, ensuring an appropriate balance in the range of class levels included. A total of 159 classroom settings were observed. The quality of teaching and learning, pupils' work and teachers' planning documents were evaluated and inspectors also reported on the arrangements in place to provide for pupils who had been granted an exemption from Irish.

After completing the school-based evaluation each team of inspectors prepared an evaluation report detailing the main findings of the evaluation of teaching and learning in Irish and in the other selected subject. Post-evaluation meetings were arranged with the staff of each school to provide feedback, to review the contents of the report, and to provide an opportunity to discuss the aspects of the provision for Irish that might be improved.

To facilitate the compilation of this composite report, the scaling mechanism in table 1.2 opposite was applied to inspectors' commentaries and evaluations.



Table 1.2: Grading scale and quantitative terms used during the evaluation

Level	Approximate operational level	Additional terminology
4	Best practice	Very good
3	Competent	Good, strengths outweigh weaknesses
2	Scope for development	Scope for further development fair, weaknesses outweigh strengths
1	Experiencing significant difficulty	Weak, poor

Quantitative terms used	Percentages
Almost all	More than 90%
Most	75–90%
Majority	50–74%
Fewer than half	25–49%
A small number	16–24%
A few	Up to 15%



Chapter 2

The context in which Irish is taught



2.1 The context

In the course of the evaluation, the inspectors examined the context in which Irish was taught and the factors influencing the work in schools. The aspects examined included the attitude of parents and of the community to Irish, the number of pupils whose parents requested that they be exempt from learning Irish, teachers' qualifications and their language ability, and the time spent teaching Irish.

2.2 Attitude of boards of management and parents to Irish

This evaluation was conducted in schools where English is the language of the school. In these schools almost all pupils learn Irish as a second language: English is their first language. They seldom hear Irish around them and they require only English to function effectively in their community. Pupils, and also their parents, need to be motivated to appreciate the importance of Irish. It is essential that these pupils respect Irish and that they enjoy learning it.

Principals were asked about the level of support from parents and from the board of management for the promotion of Irish. Principals indicated that parents generally were positively disposed towards the teaching and learning of Irish, and that they viewed Irish as part of what their children were learning at school. In a small number of cases they indicated that parents did not display any particular attitude towards Irish, and it was occasionally mentioned that some parents were negatively disposed to the Irish language. One principal stated the following:

A percentage of parents would look on Irish as an imposition on their children as they struggle with literacy and maths. This year we have made some progress and a small group of parents attend Irish classes organised by the home-school-community liaison teacher. However, parental support is difficult to harness. Irish in the home is of a poor standard and is not considered a priority.

It was reported that most boards of management (86%) were supportive of Irish and of the teaching of Irish in their schools. Principals reported that the boards facilitated the teachers' continuing professional development in regard to the teaching of Irish and provided funds for teachers to attend courses in Irish and to purchase additional resources. Some chairpersons of boards of management spoke in Irish to the staff and to the pupils during their visits to schools. Many schools supported activities organised during Seachtain na Gaeilge or by Glór na nGael. One principal outlined the support which the board of management gave to Irish and stated:

Members of the board of management have a positive and favourable attitude towards the teaching and learning of Irish. The board supports the organisation of activities during Seachtain na Gaeilge and makes funding available to purchase resources that help in any way with the teaching and learning of Irish. Board members attend a céili which is organised by the staff. The chairperson speaks a little Irish when visiting the school.

2.3 Community support for the promotion of Irish

The majority of principals noted that the community was supportive of the school's efforts to promote Irish. Most of the support from the community was, however, focused on aspects of Irish culture other than the language. Many principals mentioned that special occasions were organised, such as school concerts and Irish dancing lessons, when Irish was used. Principals in some schools noted that Irish music classes were facilitated after school by Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann and that Cumann Lúthchleas Gael organised games and Scór na bPáistí for the pupils as after-school activities. In a few schools the local community was described by the principal as being very supportive of Irish. One principal commented:

A positive disposition and a sympathy towards Irish is a common feature within the community. Irish is frequently used as the language of communication amongst many teachers within the school and the pupils have the opportunity to hear the language as a living language, and to imitate it. Many expressions of greeting are heard in Irish between teachers, pupils, and visitors to the school. The school community makes many efforts to use Irish as often as possible during Seachtain na Gaeilge. Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann plays a significant role in the area.

Over the past ten years a very diverse community of pupils is learning Irish. The number of newcomer pupils from different countries continues to increase and these pupils now form a significant part of the school community. This evaluation did not generate any specific findings regarding children from other nationalities learning Irish. Inspectors did, however, note that during their visits to classes many teachers commented informally on the positive attitude to language learning displayed by those pupils who had both Irish and English as additional languages. Classroom teachers noted that these pupils acquired several languages with ease and that they were usually more positively disposed to learning Irish than their Irish counterparts.

2.4 Exemptions

Pupils may in specific circumstances be granted an exemption from Irish if this is requested by parents. The conditions that apply to granting exemptions are dependent on the age of pupils when they first arrive in Ireland, or on specific learning difficulties that they may have. If an exemption is granted in primary school it follows that this exemption applies at post-primary level without any further application. The regulations applying to exemptions are outlined in Circular 12/96 issued by the Department of Education and Science, and that circular is currently being revised. Only a very small number of parents sought an exemption from Irish for their children.

Table 2.1: Percentage of pupils who were granted an exemption from Irish

Percentage of pupils granted exemptions	Number of schools
0%	18
Fewer than 1%	4
1% - 2.9%	12
3% - 9%	6
	40 schools

Many of the schools in this survey (45%) had no exemptions from Irish granted to pupils. In the remaining schools the percentage was in each case less than 3% with the exception of a few schools where the percentage of pupils granted exemptions was between 3% and 9%. The current procedure requires that decisions on exemptions in schools are based on the regulations as stated in Circular 12/96. As there is no national database of the number of pupils with exemptions, it is difficult to ascertain whether the cohort of pupils who were granted exemptions in these schools is above or below the norm. The samples do, however, indicate a variation in the numbers of exemptions granted and this may derive from different interpretations of the circular as it is applied in schools. In the case of some of those pupils who had been granted exemptions, principals indicated that their parents requested the exemptions in primary school to ensure that an exemption had been secured prior to the children transferring to post-primary school.

When a pupil is granted an exemption from Irish the school must ensure that the pupil completes work in another curricular area during the period of the Irish lessons. In some schools where exemptions had been granted to pupils it was observed that they participated in the Irish classes, particularly in those aspects pertaining to listening and speaking. The teachers indicated that they did not require these pupils to engage in reading and writing activities.

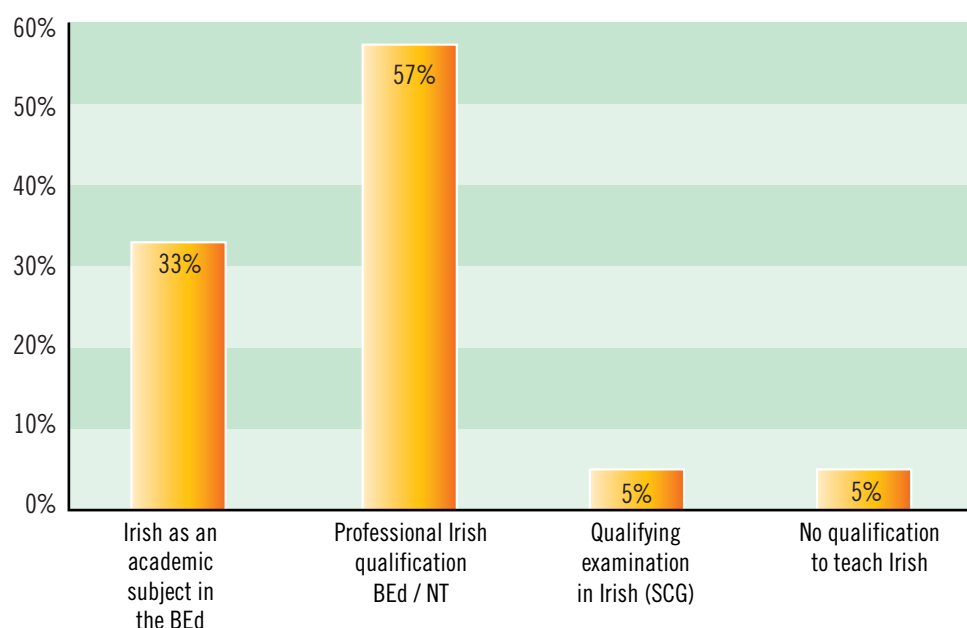
In less than half of the schools (48%) principals indicated that formal activities were arranged for pupils under the guidance of the teacher if they were not participating in the Irish lesson. Inspectors reported, however, that in less than half of these cases (41%) there was no evidence that any clear objectives applied to this work.

2.5 Teachers' qualifications for teaching Irish

One of the most important factors pertaining to teaching any language is the teacher's ability in the language. Additionally, the teacher needs to have an understanding of how language is taught and how children learn a language. Teachers' teaching skills are developed during their preservice training period and are further developed through inservice training.

Until recently the vast majority of Irish primary school teachers were educated in colleges of education in Ireland, with the exception of a small number who were trained abroad. This situation has changed significantly and, while many teachers are still trained in colleges of education in Ireland, there has been a significant increase in the number of teachers trained abroad who have not received comprehensive training in the teaching of Irish.

Fig. 2.1: The range of qualifications of teachers in the schools, N=159





During the evaluation it was found that 90% of the participating teachers had a Bachelor in Education (BEd) or National Teacher (NT) qualification which they had completed in an Irish college of education. Some 5% had qualified as primary teachers abroad and had afterwards achieved the Scrúdú Cáilíochta Gaeilge (SCG) qualification, and 5% had no qualification to teach Irish in primary schools.

There is a significant status attached to Irish and to the teaching of Irish in the BEd programmes provided in the colleges of education in Ireland. Students must obtain honours in Leaving Certificate Irish as a prerequisite for entry to the colleges of education within the State. Currently students are trained in the methodologies of teaching Irish, most participate in a professional Irish course and some students select academic Irish as a main option. The status of Irish has, however, changed over the years in the colleges. Some years ago Irish was the main language of instruction in the colleges but the use of the Irish language is much more restricted now than heretofore.

Concern has been expressed within the education system about the standard of Irish of even those teachers who are fully trained. Kelleghan et al. (2002) reported on aspects of preservice teacher education and indicated that colleges of education were unhappy with the standard of Irish of most students on entry to teacher education programmes. It was also reported that schools, and the Department of Education and Science, were unhappy with the competency levels in Irish of newly qualified teachers when graduating. Kellaghan et al. (2002) recommended various strategies to achieve two aims: improving trainee teachers' skills in teaching Irish at primary level, and providing sufficient inservice support in teaching methodologies for qualified teachers to ensure the curriculum is taught to a satisfactory standard.

2.6 Teachers' language ability

During the evaluation the inspectors noted the oral language ability of the teachers. They found that 3% of the teachers had a poor level of spoken Irish, 20% had only a fair ability to speak Irish, 55% had a satisfactory standard and 22% had a high standard of Irish. These figures reflect the findings of Harris et al. (2006, p.128), based on a national survey, in which 25% of teachers in ordinary primary schools described themselves as poor speakers of the second language.

Fig. 2.2: Teachers' ability to speak Irish and their ability to teach the language, N=158

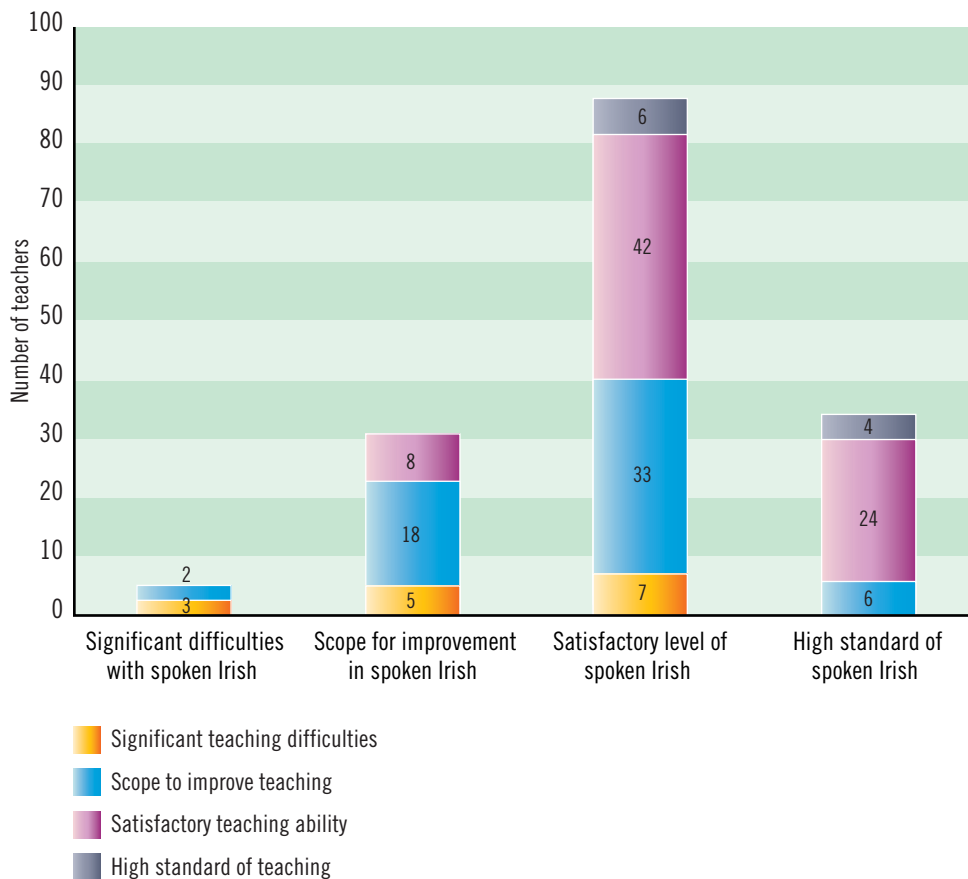


Figure 2.2 indicates a connection between teachers' ability to speak Irish and their ability to teach the language. Teachers who indicated weaknesses in their own language ability did not usually have a satisfactory or very satisfactory level of competence in teaching the language. One inspector described teaching that was characterised by poor mastery in Irish and poor methodology as follows:

There are significant difficulties pertaining to the teaching and learning of Irish. Poor standards have been observed across all language skills. The language is taught through Irish but the spoken language is inaccurate and the pronunciation is poor. It is difficult for the teacher to motivate the pupils, and the work is not challenging enough for some pupils. Most pupils in this class fail to achieve an acceptable standard in any one of the four strands. There are significant difficulties pertaining to the teaching, and it appears that the teacher does not have an understanding of the teaching methodologies for Irish.

In general the teaching of Irish was of a higher standard when teachers had a good competence in the language. Almost two-thirds of those teachers who displayed mastery of the Irish language were evaluated as good or very good in their abilities to teach the language. Only a small number

(18%) of those teachers who had a high level of competence in Irish displayed weaknesses in teaching it. This result indicates that teachers require both a competence in the language and an effective methodological approach to be successful in teaching Irish.

2.7 Teachers' continuing professional development in Irish

A total of 76% of teachers whose work was evaluated said they had participated in inservice training provided by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) for the teaching of Irish. These courses, usually facilitated over a two-day period, gave teachers an introduction to the Irish curriculum. They provided teaching staffs with an outline of the teaching methodologies and approaches in Irish and an overview of the curriculum strands for each class level. Some teachers did not participate in these courses as they had been appointed after the courses had been provided. 18% of the teachers had participated in summer inservice courses in Irish. Only a very small proportion of the summer courses available provide for the teaching and learning of Irish.

14% of schools had specific arrangements in place for the teaching of Irish to those classes where teachers were not qualified to teach Irish in the primary school. One principal described the range of supports provided for teachers who did not have a qualification to teach Irish:

We have established a mentoring system in order to support the implementation of the school policy for Irish. Our mentors and established teachers work alongside the teachers in the classrooms during Irish lessons until they achieve an appropriate standard and/or confidence to teach the class. The board of management provides financial resources to fund a period in the Gaeltacht for these teachers.

In many schools newly qualified teachers, who were qualified to teach Irish, were also offered a range of supports to assist them in their first year. In a small number of schools (14%) mentoring systems were organised and the responsibility for supporting the newly qualified teachers was usually undertaken by a member of the in-school management team. One principal outlined several initiatives which were developed in a large, urban school to support newly appointed teachers:

Teachers with special duties posts have a responsibility to provide guidance and support to newly appointed teachers. In such cases, support and guidelines are provided that generally help the teaching of Irish. Help and advice are also available regarding agreed procedures on teaching Irish such as the teaching methodologies, the resources available in the school, the assessment methods etc. The school has a strong tradition that teachers who teach at the same class level work cooperatively and collaboratively on planning for Irish.

As almost half of the teachers observed in this evaluation lacked mastery of the Irish language or experienced difficulties in their teaching approaches, there is a need to provide a comprehensive continuing professional development programme to assist teachers in improving their own Irish and to develop their skills in teaching Irish. Additionally, professional development courses should be

provided during the summer, in the Gaeltacht and in towns around the country. It is recommended that the Department of Education and Science consult with the colleges of education to see what steps can be taken to improve the standards of Irish of trainee teachers during their preservice training programme. It is also important to examine how teachers who have qualified outside the State can be provided with professional training in teaching a second language.

2.8 Time allocated to the teaching of Irish

The minimum time allocated to the teaching of Irish was reduced in the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum*. The minimum time allocation recommended for teaching Irish is 2.5 hours each week in infant classes and 3.5 hours for all other classes. Prior to 1999, teachers often spent up to one hour per day teaching Irish.

The evaluation indicates that the appropriate amount of time, as suggested in the curriculum guidelines, is provided for the teaching of Irish in most classes. In a few cases (5%) less time was spent teaching Irish than the minimum recommended time. In 14% of classes more than four hours a week was spent teaching Irish.

2.9 Summary

The evaluation found that there was considerable support for the teaching of Irish and the promotion of the Irish language in most of the schools evaluated. The majority of principals in the schools commented favourably on parental support for Irish. Schools and boards of management organised events such as Seachtain na Gaeilge and other cultural events to celebrate the language. In a small number of schools principals reported that it was difficult to harness parental support for the language.

The majority of teachers in the schools evaluated were qualified to teach Irish. Almost all teachers allocated the recommended amount of time to teaching the language. However, inspectors considered that almost half of the teachers observed in this evaluation had difficulties with their proficiency in the Irish language or with their ability to teach Irish. The majority of the teachers surveyed had completed national programmes of inservice provided by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme. A small number had completed other courses to improve their own language skills.

In 45% of the schools evaluated all pupils were learning Irish. In 40% of the schools 3% of pupils or fewer had received exemptions from the subject. A small number of schools did, however, have a significant number of pupils with exemptions from learning Irish. Inspectors found that some

teachers encouraged pupils with exemptions to participate in listening and oral activities. However, in almost half the classrooms there was little purpose to the activities organised for pupils who had exemptions from learning Irish.

2.10 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made with a view to supporting the climate and context for the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools:

Teachers' competence in Irish

- The ability of teachers to speak and write Irish is an essential skill for all primary teachers. Schools should ensure that, as far as possible, teachers assigned to teach mainstream classes should be fully qualified to teach Irish. Where a fully qualified teacher is not available for a class, the school should facilitate a co-teaching arrangement so as to ensure that Irish is taught to the pupils by another staff member who is fully qualified in Irish.
- Teacher-education providers need to review and improve the courses in Irish provided to student teachers and teachers who are trained abroad need comprehensive training in the teaching methodologies of the Irish curriculum.
- Opportunities need to be provided for all primary teachers to practise their Irish and to develop their teaching skills by attending inservice courses in the Gaeltacht or in their own locality.

Pupils' access to the Irish curriculum

- Parents should be aware of the benefits accruing to their children from learning Irish as a second language in primary school, and of the implications for children's lives in the future of being granted an exemption from learning Irish.
- Schools should ensure that as many pupils as possible engage in listening and oral activities at each class level.
- A planned programme for those pupils exempt from learning Irish should be developed by the class teacher in collaboration with the support teachers. During the Irish lesson these pupils should be engaged in structured learning activities that support pupils' knowledge and skill development in other areas of the curriculum.
- Schools should give consideration to involving parents to a greater extent in the promotion of Irish in schools. Opportunities might be provided for parents to learn Irish as part of the range of school activities. Parents would benefit from guidance on how best to support their children's learning in Irish.



Chapter 3

Planning for Irish



3.1 Whole-school planning

The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999) confirms that an essential prerequisite for the effective implementation of the curriculum is the collaborative planning process that focuses specifically on a whole-school approach to improving the education of pupils. The plan should clarify the underlying principles of the Irish curriculum in the context of the school. Clear guidelines should be provided, based on the curriculum, outlining the school's approach to the teaching of each of the strands throughout the school so that a plan is agreed for the ongoing development of pupils' learning as they progress from class to class. Guidelines must therefore be developed for the systematic progression of pupils' competencies in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The school should also plan for the use of appropriate teaching materials to support this programme of work. The plan should also clearly state the school's policy in regard to the regular assessment of pupils' progress in Irish. It is important to remember that planning is an ongoing systematic process for the whole school and it is important to regularly review the implementation of both school policies and individual planning. The principal has a key leadership responsibility in regard to this. It is also important that teachers' individual skills and expertise are used to best effect during the planning process.

3.2 Whole-school planning in practice

3.2.1 Formulating the school plan

Most school plans were developed collaboratively by the teaching staff who liaised frequently with members of the school community. In the majority of schools (81%), the school principals reported that school plans were formulated collaboratively. Staff often initiated the planning work after attending an inservice course. The principal and the teachers designed the plans, though in the majority of cases other members of the school community also participated in the process. One inspector outlined the process involved in devising the plan:

The whole staff and the board of management have contributed to the development of the school plan for Irish. Planning is a collaborative whole-school process. The principal guides and leads this aspect of the work and teachers' collaborative participation for the benefit of pupils is very effective.

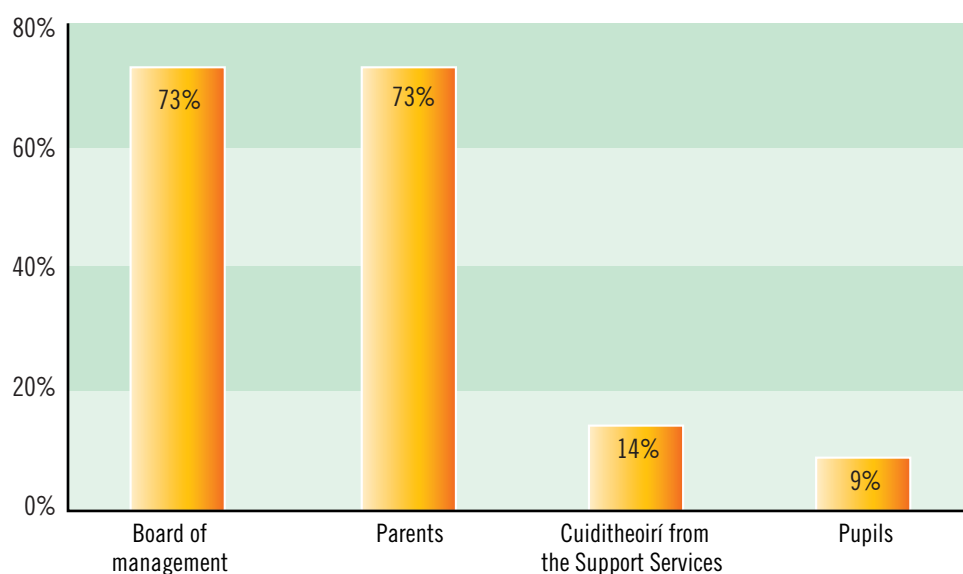
In one or two schools the boards of management employed substitute teachers to facilitate teachers to work collaboratively on the Irish plan.

Many teachers indicated that the support services of the Primary Curriculum Support Service (PCSP) and the School Development Planning Services (SDPS) were very helpful. In a small number of schools, however, teachers did not use the templates provided by the support services to best effect. This curtailed schools in adapting their own school plans to reflect the particular context and needs of the school. The following is the opinion of one of the inspectors:

The staff is over dependent on PCSP and SDPS. Many of the documents from these support services are included in the files with very little adaptation. Class teachers do not appear to have reflected on the teaching methodologies or on how they might implement the stated objectives for each of the four strands in the context of their own classes.

In a majority of the schools, there was evidence from school principals that other members of the school community had opportunities to contribute to the formulation of the school plan for Irish. As figure 3.1 illustrates, boards of management and parents were consulted in the majority of schools on the contents of the plan. Others, such as pupils, special needs assistants and facilitators from the school support services, were consulted in some cases. In less than 30% of the schools, the plan was drawn up exclusively by the teaching staff. It was evident in many cases that plans had been officially approved by the board of management of the school.

Fig. 3.1: Representatives of the school community who participated in the whole-school planning process, N=39 schools



Good practice in the teaching and learning of Irish was evident in those schools where the principal or other members of the in-school management team led and guided the development of the work. Inspectors, however, noted that a teacher was given specific responsibility for Irish in only 38% of schools. In a few of those schools where a co-ordinator of Irish had been identified, the duties assigned involved the purchase, maintenance and organisation of teaching and learning resources. The leadership role for whole-school policy development in regard to the teaching and learning of Irish was not included. The majority of schools, however, had no Irish co-ordinator.

The significant time allocation provided at staff meetings in some schools to discuss curriculum matters was commendable. Principals reported that schools dedicated an average of 20% of their staff meetings to the discussion of curricular related topics. Some schools also stated that minutes were kept systematically and distributed to all staff members to keep them informed on planning decisions that had been agreed. Committees were formed in some larger schools to give teachers an opportunity, usually at their own class level, to consult with each other on planning and this approach was clearly beneficial.

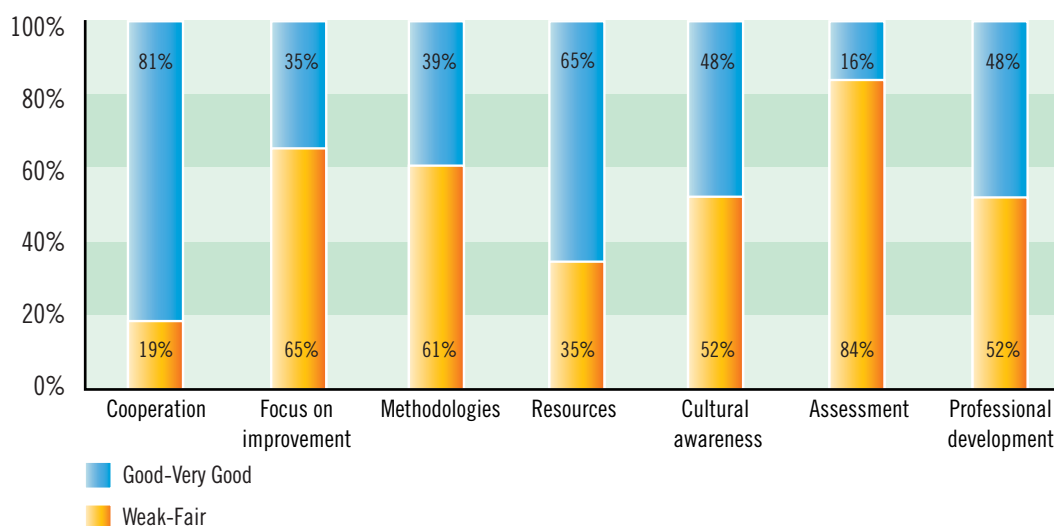
In a small number of schools (20%) an action plan formed a central part of the work. In these schools the action plan outlined how the school plan would be implemented and a review date was set by the staff to evaluate the extent of the implementation. The criteria for success that would be used to review the extent of the implementation of the Irish curriculum were also listed.

3.3 Quality of whole-school planning

Overall, the quality of whole-school planning for Irish was good or very good in almost half of the schools (47%) evaluated. Aspects of the school plans such as the provision of resources, the professional development of teachers and the development of cultural awareness among pupils had been considered in approximately half of the schools evaluated and there was evidence that these aspects of the plans were being implemented.

Weaknesses in whole-school planning for Irish were evident in most schools. Aspects of the whole-school plan such as the assessment of pupil progress, the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning, and the focus on increasing pupil achievement and school improvement were described as weak by inspectors in most schools. Schools had not given enough consideration to planning the use of differentiated teaching methodologies, or to the breadth of teaching approaches that might be used to assist teachers in delivering the curriculum. These findings will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Fig. 3.2: An overview of the evaluation by inspectors of aspects of whole-school planning for Irish, N=39 school plans



3.3.1 The focus on improving the standards of Irish in schools

In one-third of the schools good practices were evident in relation to improving the standards of Irish. This good practice was focused on promoting ongoing improvement of learning. This work was based on the curriculum and all four strands were included. The plan included clear guidelines regarding the time allocation that should be provided for the teaching and learning of Irish, in line with the recommendations of the curriculum. In those schools that were most effective guidelines were included in relation to the language to be taught at each class level as part of a graded language action plan and the time allocation that should be given to particular themes. There was a sense of continuity and development in regard to the content, richness and depth of language to be taught. Specific learning objectives were detailed in the plan for each class level and these were appropriate to the context of the particular school. This statement of evaluation describes the good practice observed in one particular school:

The policies developed for the teaching of Irish are highly commendable. The learning programme for each class level is outlined and reference is made in these programmes to aims, objectives, strands, themes, sub-themes and to informal Irish. Methodologies, booklists and resources used are also listed. There is good provision made in the plan for a variety of teaching and learning approaches, including cooperative learning, active learning, and collaborative work. The attention directed to the informal use of Irish and to the communicative approach is commendable. Appropriate long-term aims are cited for Irish, and attention is drawn to the development of the skills required to learn the language. Learning and achievement are integrated into the planning in a very effective manner.

In a minority of schools a structure was in place to connect individual planning to overall school planning. In such cases each teacher had a copy of the school policies and the long-term planning of teachers, in particular, reflected the overall school plan.

However, inspectors reported that in the majority of schools there was little connection between the whole-school plan for Irish and school improvement and development. There was little awareness or reference to the learning objectives of the curriculum or to the pupils' achievement on a range of language skills. There was no whole-school view of the standards achieved by the pupils. In addition there was little emphasis on ensuring that there was progression in the range of activities from class to class or that the pupils experienced success across the range of language objectives. Principals and teachers had not considered sufficiently whether the curriculum was implemented successfully in the classrooms. In the majority of schools there was no connection between individual planning and the school plan.

In the majority of schools many of the school plans had little influence on the standard of Irish of pupils because very often there was no specific connection between the planning, the teaching and learning in the classrooms, pupils' achievements, and assessment. One inspector stated that:

The school plan does not have an influence on individual planning. An appropriate emphasis is placed in the plan on important aspects of the curriculum such as language functions and the importance of using a wide range of teaching strategies, but individual planning only describes a list of activities for the daily lesson. The timetable is structured to reflect the curriculum guidelines. Long-term planning is not provided. There is no reference to learning objectives and the curriculum is not adapted to the ability levels of children. An emphasis is placed on themes and activities in the textbooks. There is no system in place for the assessment of Irish. There is no evidence to suggest that self-evaluation or an evaluation of the progress of pupils takes place.

The principle of self-evaluation was rarely a feature of school practice. Schools had not outlined strategies to review regularly every aspect of the teaching and learning of Irish. One inspector stated:

Reference is made in the plan to the ways in which teachers might evaluate the implementation of the plan but there is no action plan to assess progress in relation to the objectives. Individual teachers are left to implement the plan in their own classes.

3.3.2 Teaching methodologies

In fewer than half the schools (39%) the school plans clearly outlined the provision made for teaching methodologies and for differentiated learning and they indicated how the teaching programme was adapted to accommodate the various class levels. Samples were given in these plans of the appropriate strategies that might be used to organise learning activities. A large number of expressions, phrases, and vocabulary relevant to the language functions were listed for each class level. There was a focus on the communicative approach, on the integration of the strands and on the teaching methodologies. Teachers also were often reminded of the importance of speaking Irish at times other than during the Irish lessons. Sometimes clear guidelines were provided regarding the integration of Irish with other subjects.



However, in the majority of schools (61%) there was scope for development, or there were significant difficulties evident in regard to the area of the school plan that focused on teaching methods. These schools did not display a range of teaching methodologies or learning activities for some of the strands. Inspectors were concerned about the lack of clarity pertaining to the learning objectives in different strands and the suitability of the learning programmes for the differentiated needs of pupils. It was apparent that there was a need to review the different strategies used and to agree, as a staff, on the most effective methodologies. Schools are advised to discuss the teaching methodologies and to record their decisions in the school planning documentation. It is also advisable to refer to the curriculum documents, and in particular to refer on a regular basis to the guidelines for teachers, as a source for practices outlining variations in teaching methodologies. Inspectors formed the opinion that some teachers lacked an understanding of some of the terminology used in the curriculum handbooks. The inspectors recommend that the terminology pertaining to the teaching strategies in the guidelines for teachers be clarified in order to help teachers to use them more effectively.

3.3.3 Teaching resources

In the majority of schools (65%) the staff had planned for the provision of resources. It was obvious from visiting classrooms that plenty of resources were available. Principals indicated that the financial support provided by the board of management and by the parents' association was very helpful in developing the range of materials that had already been funded by the Department of Education and Science. Generally, in situations where a particular teacher had an assigned responsibility for Irish, the range of resources was developed on a regular basis and there was a

greater selection of library books and other resources available, and these were well organised. In a very small number of schools there was a connection in the school plan between specific resources and themes in the curriculum. However, in one-third of the schools only a list of the available resources was included. All too frequently it was observed that there was a dearth of reading material for pupils and a shortage in general of Irish storybooks.

It was evident to the inspectors that there was a strong connection between the appropriate use of materials, the teacher's effective teaching skills, and the achievement of pupils. Schools are advised to create a plan that would outline the best use that might be made of resources to teach particular lessons. It is important to have a list of songs and poems available in the school and to include guidelines as to the classes in which they might most appropriately be used.

3.3.4 Cultural awareness: developing an interest in culture

Reference was made in many of the plans to the importance of developing pupils' understanding of the culture of Ireland and suggestions were made as to how this might be achieved. There was no evidence in many schools, however, that opportunities were used to develop this by teaching Irish songs and music. There was no evidence in planning, with the exception of a very small number of schools, that Irish dancing was taught as part of the Physical Education programme. In most schools a great deal of emphasis was placed on the teaching and playing of Gaelic games. It was also clear that teachers focused on organising events through Irish each year during Seachtain na Gaeilge.

Most of the plans referred to the importance of developing a positive attitude towards Irish, but very few specific strategies were outlined to fulfil this aim. Many of the plans included vocabulary that might be used at times throughout the day, and in some cases phrases listed were graded according to the class levels in which they might appropriately be used. This practice was not widely used, however, as schools had not developed any systems in regard to this.

3.3.5 Assessment

Planning for assessment was identified as the weakest aspect of whole-school plans. Only a small number of schools (16%) displayed an acceptable or a high level of competency in their approach to assessment. In these schools a whole-school approach to assessing pupils' progress had been established and a plan had been formulated to assess pupils' achievement levels. In general, however, it was not evident that a connection had been made between the assessment of learning and whole-school planning work, or planning even at an individual class level.

In most of the school plans reference was made to some of the assessment instruments mentioned in the curriculum. The most commonly cited instruments were the teacher's observation of the pupil, tasks and tests devised by the teacher, and assessment based on a selection of the pupils'

work. Pupils' written work was regularly monitored in most classes. In some classes effective feedback was given to pupils on this written work.

It is a matter of concern that the connection between the improvement of the standard of Irish in the school and planning at whole-school level was not established in the planning documentation reviewed. To this end assessment should be a starting point for planning. Inspectors advised schools to develop assessment as a key aspect of whole-school and of classroom planning. This practice needs to be developed to ensure that the learning objectives are based on the needs of the pupils and that there is a systematic approach to learning.

3.3.6 Professional development

The vast majority of those schools evaluated had received support from PCSP and SDPS to assist the staff in implementing the curriculum. In a very small number of schools reference was made in the school plan to staff development in regard to Irish. In a few instances it was indicated that the board of management provided financial support or substitute teacher support for teachers to attend courses. References in the plan to the support required by teachers who had not yet completed the *Scrúdú Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge* were very rare. In a very small number of schools summer courses were organised for the staff which included a focus on the development of teachers' skills in teaching Irish.

To derive most benefit from the various support structures in place to support the teaching of Irish, schools should assess their needs and would benefit from contacting summer inservice course providers (for example, education centres, colleges of education, and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation), to seek courses for Irish at a local level. It is recommended that the mentoring system for newly qualified teachers be availed of to support newly qualified teachers and teachers who do not have a qualification to teach Irish in the primary school.

3.4 Individual teachers' planning

3.4.1 The importance of planning

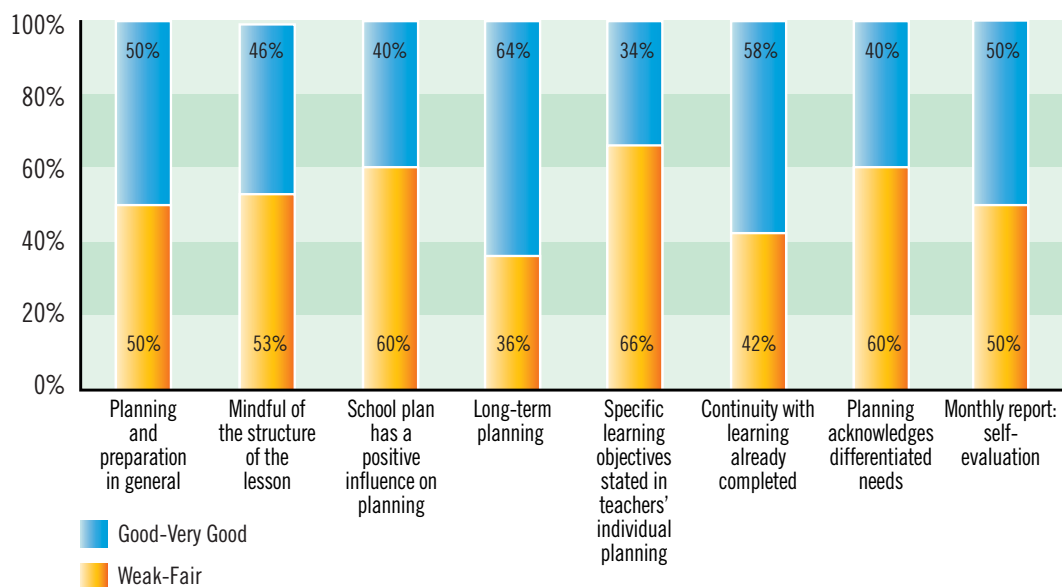
Good preparation is fundamental to good teaching. Teaching improves as a consequence of good preparation and good planning. The Irish curriculum is arranged systematically through four strands, *Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing*, and these are subdivided into strand units. It is expected that teachers will take these into account when they are planning. Clear language objectives should also be stated as well as the language input that is to be taught so that pupils can effectively engage in communicative activities. Planning also needs to indicate good teaching strategies – responding to the varying abilities within the class, developing what pupils already know, integrating different aspects of the work, and creating ways in which new knowledge can be reinforced.

3.4.2 The standard of planning of individual teachers

Almost all teachers were engaged in individual planning, although this was often incomplete. Short-term planning was usually prepared either fortnightly or weekly. Long-term planning was prepared either on a term basis or as a full year plan.

Figure 3.3 indicates that inspectors described 50% of teachers as having a good or a very good standard of individual planning. In those instances where good planning was in place it was evident that care had been taken with the structure of the planning. Aims and learning objectives were recorded, the language outcomes to be achieved were specified and it was clear that the teacher envisaged what language acquisition would result for the pupils. Inspectors noted that the lessons were well structured and that the learning objectives were clarified. The teachers in these classes made conscious efforts to base the lessons on what pupils had previously learned. Connections were made with the language skills and the language experiences that pupils had already acquired. Reference was made in the best plans to teaching methods and the varying abilities of students were also considered. Provision was made for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Planning was in place for the teaching of poetry and for the role of storytelling within the learning programme.

Fig. 3.3: Evaluation of individual teachers' planning, N=159 teachers



Weaknesses were, however, evident in half of the plans. The main weaknesses included: not identifying specific learning objectives, not having a stated language input (vocabulary, communicative sentences and other language) and not adjusting the content to suit the varying abilities of pupils. Although teaching objectives were sometimes mentioned the teacher's intended

language input was rarely clarified and only very occasionally was there a clear development to be seen from one fortnight to the next.

Teachers did not plan for the various stages of the lesson, and they had difficulty in identifying the specific receptive and expressive language skills that they wished to develop during the lessons. In half of the classes the planning was based on the content of the textbooks. Sometimes the outcome of such an approach was that teachers did not reflect sufficiently on the suitability of the content for the class and the pupils did not therefore perform as well as expected. The outcome of such practice was often that the activities were limited to textbook activities, and that no provision was made for the specific learning needs of pupils. One inspector described such practice as follows:

The work plan is based on the content of a series of textbooks, but there is no provision made for the development of the language skills. Although there is a great variation in pupils' abilities, a differentiated approach is not evident in the planning. In short-term planning the activities and the themes are selected from the textbooks but there is no focus on the specific language input to be taught or on the communicative approach. Attention is not paid to developing the language ability of pupils and clear objectives for the development of the various language skills are not specified.

3.4.3 Monthly progress records

Teachers record the curriculum work they have completed during the month by means of monthly progress records. The teaching staff usually designs the progress records and these can be helpful in tracking pupils' progress, monitoring the implementation of the curriculum in the school, and reviewing progress and continuity from class to class in curriculum areas.

It is recommended that teachers would agree the use of the monthly progress records and that they adopt a common approach to the type of monthly records available. These records should focus on the learning objectives that have been achieved during each particular month. Such an approach would facilitate staff in assessing effectively the implementation of the curriculum at school level. This would also be beneficial to teachers as they engage in short-term planning for pupils' learning needs and the systematic development of pupils' language abilities.

In half the classrooms the management of records maintained by teachers on their work was, according to the inspectors, of a high or very high standard. In those classes displaying the highest standards of practice the records kept were outlined by strands and strand units and the focus was directed on the skills acquired and the language learned by pupils. Notes were maintained of the progress made by individual pupils and some teachers included self-evaluation notes and brief written notes of various aspects of the work. Inspectors stated that in the other half of the classes the records maintained by teachers were weak or required further development. In one school, for example, the inspector noted that there was no satisfactory note being kept of the progress made by pupils and therefore that "there was no evidence to suggest that what pupils were learning was a progressive development of what had been learned before".



3.5 Summary

Most of the schools in this evaluation participated in whole-school collaborative planning but many of these plans had little effect on the standard of Irish of pupils because very often there was no connection between the school plan and individual teachers' plans, or the teaching and learning in the classrooms. Assessment formed a central part of the planning process and planning had a clear focus on improving the standard of Irish in only a few schools. The plans often described the key messages of the curriculum but clear guidelines were not provided to help teachers to plan and implement the strands as outlined in the curriculum, and there was no regular review in place that might ensure progress.

The inspectors described the standard of individual teachers' planning in half (50%) of the classrooms visited as being of a high or very high standard. Aims and objectives were stated, the language outcomes to be attained were clarified, and it was obvious that the teacher had a clear understanding of the language that would be acquired as a consequence. Reference was made to the teaching methods and consideration was given to the varying abilities of pupils. In the other half of the classes visited, it was the inspectors' opinion that there was scope for further development in

individual planning, or that significant weaknesses were apparent in the planning. In these instances, individual teachers' planning was based on the textbooks. The teachers in these classes had not clarified the learning objectives for the lessons and insufficient attention was given to the language input that should be taught. Teachers had not reflected on how the communicative approach might be implemented and they did not detail the teaching methodologies that might be required. Progress from one fortnight to the next was not evident in the planning.

3.6 Recommendations

The following is a summary of the key recommendations made by the inspectors after examining the school planning documentation and individual teachers' plans:

Whole-school planning and individual teachers' planning

- Whole-school plans should provide a useful overview of the curricular objectives which pupils are expected to attain at each class level. The language to be learned, and the resources required to achieve this, should be outlined.
- Objectives to improve the teaching and learning of Irish should be outlined with specific emphasis on the standards and the language skills appropriate to each class level in each of the four strands of the curriculum. These objectives should be regularly reviewed so that development and progress at each class level can be confirmed.
- Individual teachers' planning must reflect the stated objectives of the curriculum. Published materials should only be used as a support to the implementation of the curriculum, and they should not impede teachers from drawing on the range of experience and teaching skills that they have already acquired.
- Schools should consider teaching other aspects of the curriculum through Irish and planning systematically for this.

Curriculum leadership

- Schools should ensure that a member of the school's internal management team assumes responsibility for the coordination and the provision of Irish in the school.
- Consideration should be given to the value of having the curriculum leader directing the whole-school planning process, leading the review of the implementation of the curriculum, and co-ordinating the assessment of pupils' learning at each class level.
- An action plan should be developed as a central aspect of the review process.

Methodologies

- Whole-school plans should provide guidance to teachers on how to implement the three elements of the communicative lesson. Staffs should avail of the services of the PCSP curriculum advisers to guide them in planning for each of the four strands of the curriculum.
- Whole-school plans should provide specific guidance for teachers at each class level on the provision of differentiated learning experiences for pupils with varying learning needs.

Assessment

- Guidelines should be issued to schools on how to assess pupils' progress in Irish as a second language. This will require
 - o the development of standardised assessment tests for pupils with Irish as a second language
 - o the development of assessment profiles for pupils in Irish that are based on the curriculum and appropriate to the different class levels.
- Whole-school plans should outline specific strategies for the assessment and monitoring of pupils' progress in Irish. Each school, according to its specific context, should set learning objectives for each of the four strands which the pupils at different class levels are expected to attain. These learning objectives should be assessed to provide benchmarks of pupils' learning and the information derived from assessment should be used to inform planning.



Chapter 4

Teaching and learning: listening and speaking



4.1 Introduction

The fundamental aim of the curriculum is to promote the use of Irish as a natural language of communication. From the first day at school efforts are made to develop pupils' ability to understand and to speak the language. It is accepted that communication can occur through listening, speaking, reading, or writing but that pupils' ability to communicate is best developed when there is an integrated approach to their learning in all of these areas.

The strands *Listening* and *Speaking* are taught from junior infants onwards, and *Reading* and *Writing* are taught from second class onwards. This chapter presents data on the quality of teaching and learning in two of the four strands: *Listening* and *Speaking*. At a later stage in the report the outcomes of the evaluation of the other two strands, *Reading* and *Writing* will be presented.

This chapter examines the extent to which the communicative approach to teaching Irish is implemented in practice. It also presents the findings on the pupils' engagement in, and enjoyment of, learning Irish. The *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge* (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p.4) emphasises this aspect of learning when it states "Is fearr a fhoghlaiméoidh an páiste an Ghaeilge má bhíonn taitneamh le baint aisti agus dearcadh dearfach á chothú." [The children will learn Irish better when they can enjoy the learning experience and when they have developed a positive attitude to the language].

Apart from the basic communicative purpose attached to daily activities, there is also a rich cultural dimension to the language. Schools have a responsibility to share this cultural dimension with the next generation. This cultural dimension includes stories, poetry, songs, drama, and *seanfhocail* (proverbs). While the *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge* (p. 2) does not include these aspects of the language as separate strand units or components of the curriculum, it recognises their richness and their centrality in the culture of the language when it states “...cuireann foghlaim na Gaeilge ar chumas an pháiste eolas a chur ar chultúr, ar litríocht, ar sheanchas agus ar amhránaíocht” [...the learning of Irish contributes to the child’s knowledge of culture, literature, storytelling and song-singing].

One of the curriculum’s general objectives is pupils’ enjoyment and participation in poetry and drama. The inspectors included these aspects as part of their evaluation of the teaching and learning of Irish so that they could gain an insight into the scope of the teaching. Findings regarding the teaching of poetry, story and drama are interspersed throughout this chapter.

4.2 Listening in the curriculum

The curriculum acknowledges the fundamental importance of listening as a key to language acquisition. Listening is also an essential prerequisite to the development of speaking. In other words listening is a receptive skill that underpins the development of the expressive skills required for speaking. In regard to Irish, one is usually dependent on the school to create opportunities to develop the language skills of pupils. Pupils have very limited opportunities to hear Irish outside school, with the exception of TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta, an occasional television or radio programme, and an occasional family where Irish is spoken. A lot of opportunities have to be provided for pupils to hear the language, and the more speakers and situations available to them the better this is for them.

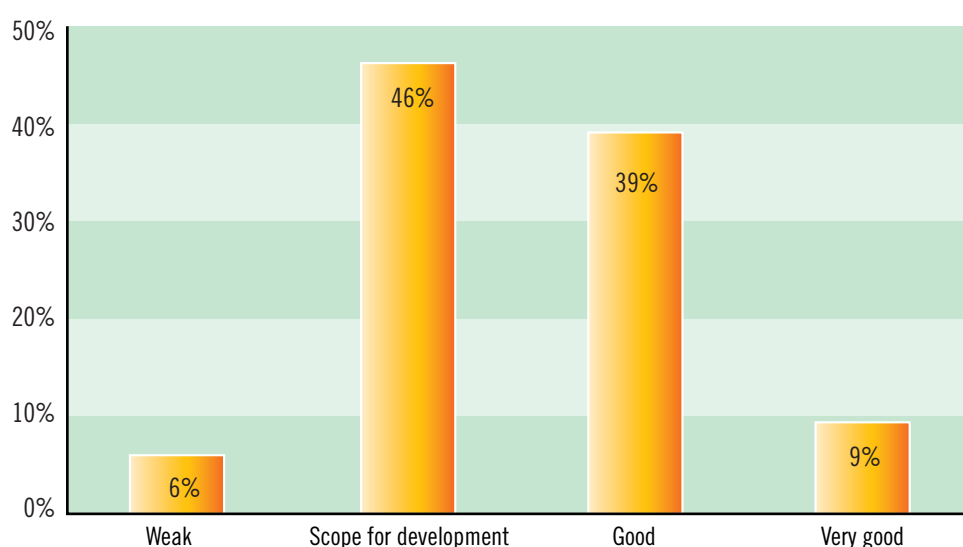
Listening is a specific skill that needs to be systematically developed. Although it was always known that one needed an understanding of Irish before one could speak the language, particular attention has been given in the *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge*, to the formal development of listening. The skills that pupils need to develop while engaged in listening activities include internalising the sound structures associated with the language, acquiring an understanding of the rhythm and structure of the language, and acquiring an understanding of the substance of the language. The tone and context of the language are central to the development of these skills. It is expected that structured opportunities to develop such skills will be provided during lessons, as well as drawing on other opportunities arising from the ordinary use of Irish when engaged in classroom and school management activities, and when selecting phrases to praise and to give direction to pupils. The challenge for teachers is to organise activities that allow pupils to acquire these competencies without difficulty. Activities such as the daily repetition and reading of stories, rhymes and poems to pupils are very important in this regard.

4.3 Teaching and learning: listening

4.3.1 Teaching listening skills

Good practice in the formal development of listening skills was evident in less than half the classes evaluated (48%). In these classes effective use was made of audio-visual materials, ICT resources, and CDs that were designed to develop listening skills.

Fig.4.1: Evaluation of the teaching of listening skills, N=156 classes



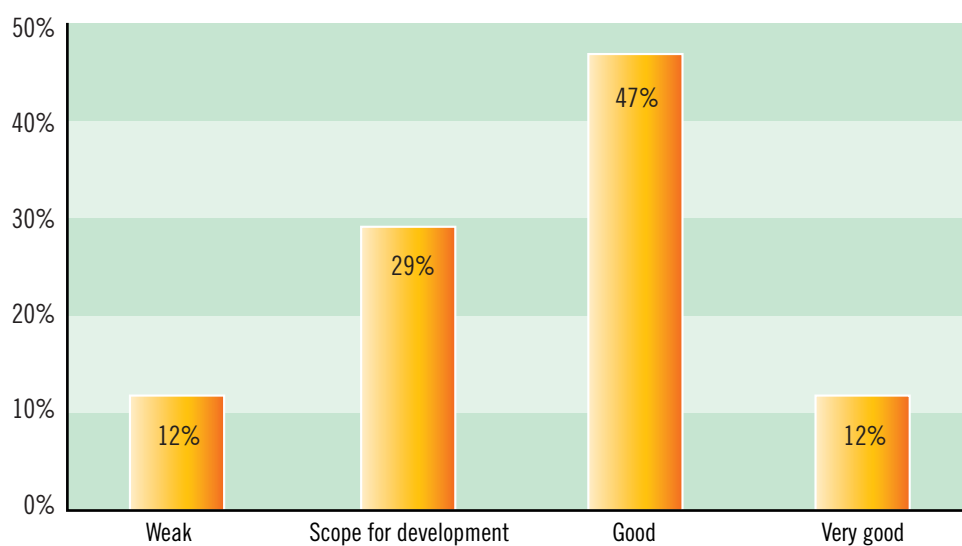
In those classes where a high standard of understanding was achieved, it was reported that pupils were used to hearing a rich language repertoire, that they had acquired a wide vocabulary and that they had a good understanding of the syntax and structure of the language. Pupils were attentive during the listening activities which the teacher had organised for them. In those classes where good practice was observed the pupils displayed a good understanding of the teacher's instructions and of the questions asked. They were able to answer simple questions and they participated enthusiastically in the learning activities.

In the majority of classes (52%) there was very little listening with a specific purpose taking place. Although parts of the lesson focused on playing communicative games, it was reported that there was no clear learning objective, and that the work did not build on children's previous experiences. In general, there was little variety in the listening activities provided and, in some cases, there were difficulties in organising the activities. It was reported that the CDs for listening activities were not used to good effect in some classes, and that pupils were not advised regarding the importance of listening carefully. Some of the activities were narrow and had little focus on learning, and the listening activities provided for many of the pupils were not sufficiently challenging.

4.3.2 Teaching stories, poetry and rhymes

In the majority of classes observed (59%) the teaching of story, poetry and rhyme was of a high or very high standard. In these classes a fine repertoire of rhyme was taught, stories were regularly read and emphasis was placed on poetry as a rich and enjoyable source of language. Visual materials and big books were used effectively to give pupils an understanding of language and to encourage their interest levels.

Fig.4.2: Evaluation of the teaching of story, poetry and rhymes, N=157 classes



Poetry

In the classes that had a good standard of Irish it was noted that pupils recited a lot of poetry, rhymes and songs, which helped them to improve their pronunciation and gave them an opportunity to experience the pace and rhythm of the language. Poetry was taught on a regular basis and this work was often very enjoyable. In half of the classes observed, particularly in the junior classes, pupils recited action poems, and this approach was helpful in consolidating the work on vocabulary and becoming familiar with the structure and context of the language.

Poetry was mostly taught through group recitation, with pupils repeating the poems after the teacher. Although an outcome of such practice is that good pronunciation is developed as well as a natural speaking rhythm, it is recommended that a variety of methodologies should be used. In a few classes this learning was connected with drama and this approach was very beneficial.

However, the range of poetry that pupils were learning in class was limited. On further examination, it was evident that most of these poems were selected from the workbooks and they were not related to the content of the lesson. Only on very rare occasions were poems selected to suit a

particular theme, or because of the poet who wrote the poem, or to reflect the interests of the pupils. The number of poems committed to memory by pupils was disappointing. In one-third of the classes observed pupils did not know a suitable repertoire of poems. In the questionnaires completed by teachers most indicated that they taught between one and three poems a month, and a small number of teachers said they taught between four and six poems a month. In a few classes teachers said that they did not teach any poems. It is recommended that more emphasis be placed on teaching poetry in schools, and teachers should understand the value of committing a selection of poems to memory.

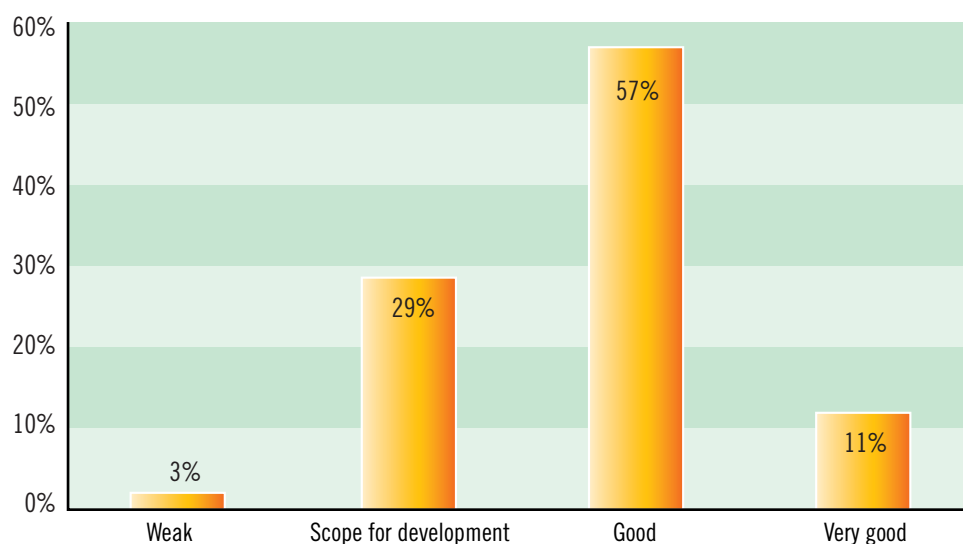
Storytelling

In those classes where a high standard of Irish was evident there was a significant emphasis on telling stories or short tales as an introductory text to the communicative activity. The new vocabulary included in the story was explained before the teacher began the continuous narration and teachers ensured that pupils had sufficient understanding to be able to follow the main elements of the story. Where good effective work was occurring teachers often used attractive resources, big books, tapes and technological supports, to explain a story. In these classes a story was told and followed by a dramatic representation to bring the story to life. Pupils engaged in their own learning, they liked the story and were excited about their representation of it.

However, this type of work only occurred in a few classes. Story was used in fewer than half the classes observed, and story as a teaching strategy was mainly used in the junior classes. Usually, when a story was being told, pupils listened to the teacher or to a CD without much explanation or work in advance to ensure that they understood the story. The stories were sometimes too difficult and did not reflect the interests of the pupils. Frequently the story had not been internalised by the teacher so that he/she might lend full expression to its telling. There was often no clear connection to be found between the story and the rest of the lesson. Sometimes a worksheet with questions was given to pupils to complete after the story was told when it would have been preferable to continue with extended oral work.

4.3.3 Irish as the language of instruction

Fig. 4.3: Irish as the language of instruction during Irish lessons, N=159 classes



The majority of teachers (68%) used Irish as the language of instruction throughout the lessons observed. In those classes where this good practice was taking place the teachers used appropriate resources and visual materials during the precommunicative phase to explain the language and to help the pupils to understand the new language. When teachers continuously spoke in Irish pupils had a valuable opportunity to learn a living language spoken naturally, and this assisted them in understanding the language. The teachers' language use provided pupils with an exemplar for modelling language.

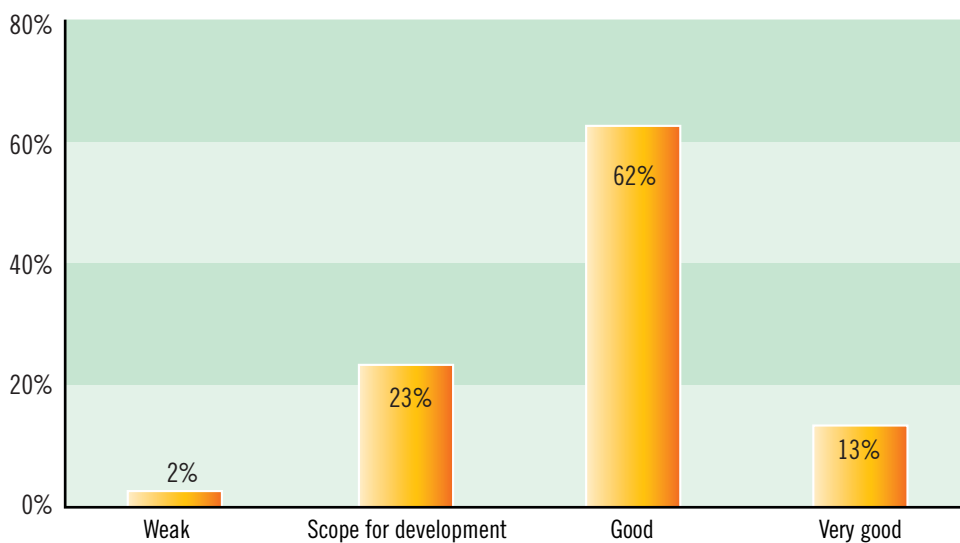
There was scope for improvement or significant difficulties in the use of Irish as the language of instruction in less than one-third of the classes observed (32%). Too much attention was focused on asking questions and it was, in some instances, reported that many instructions were given to pupils through English; that new words were explained in English; and that translation was the method sometimes used while teaching. Very few teaching aids were used to support learning in these classes and the resources available were not used to best effect.

4.3.4 The outcomes of listening

In most classes (75%) pupils displayed an appropriate level of understanding of the language used in the lesson, the questions asked, what the teachers had to say, and the instructions given throughout the lesson. However, in 25% of the classes, pupils' language ability was not being

effectively developed during the listening tasks. In two-thirds of the classes pupils displayed an understanding of the sounds and the natural rhythm of the language. It was reported that the pupils, particularly those in the junior classes, had a very high standard of pronunciation when reciting poetry, rhymes and songs.

Fig. 4.4: Number of pupils who displayed an appropriate level of understanding of what they had heard, N=157 classes



However, the listening activities observed included a restricted range of language. Although pupils in most classes displayed an appropriate level of understanding of what they had heard during the lessons, inspectors were of the opinion that pupils' language skills were not sufficiently developed, and that the formal listening activities required more enriching language and more challenging work.

4.4 Speaking in the curriculum

The *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge* (p.4) places "... béim an-láidir ar labhairt na Gaeilge sa churaclam. Mar sin, is é an cumas cumarsáide an sprioc is tábhachtaí atá le baint amach ag an bpáiste" [...a strong emphasis on speaking Irish in the curriculum. Consequently, the most important objective is to enable the child to develop communicative ability]. The curriculum describes a wide range of methodologies that are worthwhile in developing the communicative abilities of pupils, and further describes a range of strategies and sub-skills pertaining to speaking. These strategies include role playing, interviews, dramas, tasks, communicative games and activities that are used particularly during the communicative phase.



As already mentioned in this report, the starting point when selecting content for a lesson, is the pupils themselves and their interests. It is very important therefore that the context created for using language is based on pupils' lives and that they are actively involved in the tasks. The language necessary for such engagement needs to be taught so that the pupils can participate in real communication with each other during the lesson by actively participating in the tasks. The curriculum recommends a particular structure for the Irish lesson so that the lesson is as communicative as possible. Three phases are included in that structure. In the *precommunicative phase* the new language input is taught. During the *communicative phase* tasks and social interaction are organised to allow pupils the opportunity to practise the language they have learned with each other in authentic communicative situations. During the *postcommunicative phase* the teacher reviews the language being used by the pupils and ensures that they understand the language and that they can use it in other situations.

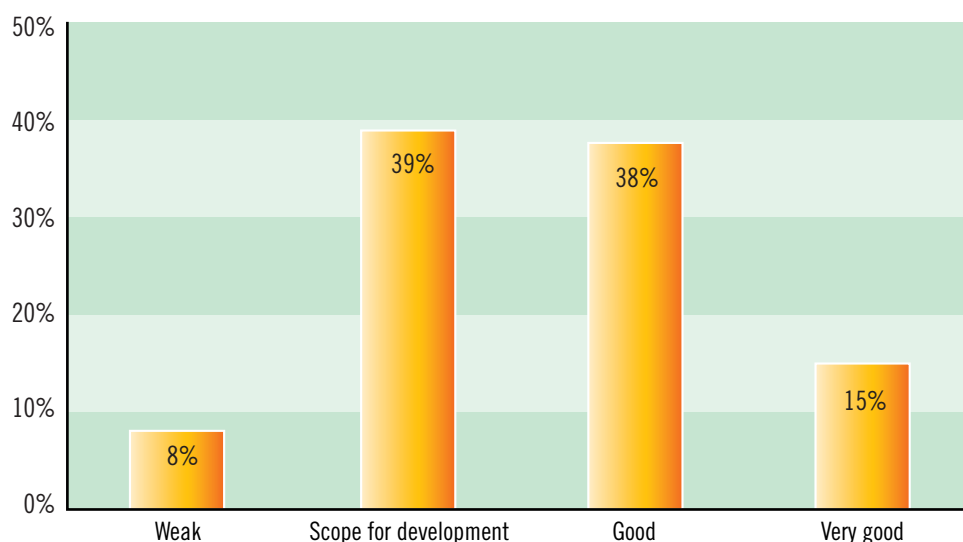
It is recommended in the curriculum that the teacher would adhere to using Irish while teaching the lesson and that appropriate resources would be used, as well as plenty of repetition in order to confirm pupils' understanding of the language. It is also recommended that the oral language settings are as communicative as possible and that the emphasis during this period is on learning the language and using it correctly. This practice provides pupils with the confidence to master the phrases and the structures they require so that they truly communicate with each other during the communicative period.

4.5 Teaching and learning: oral language

4.5.1 Teaching oral language skills

Examples of the effective teaching of oral language were observed during the evaluation. In 53% of the classrooms a specific language input was taught to pupils and attention was directed to the phases of the lessons. Teachers in 8% of classes had difficulties with this aspect of teaching Irish and it was evident that further scope for development was required in regard to 39% of teachers.

Fig. 4.5: The structure of the lessons in line with recommendations in the curriculum, N=158 classes



In those classes where good practice was evident pupils were presented with a structured language programme. The phases of the lesson were well defined and a range of methodologies was used. There was a targeted language input at the beginning of the lesson. This language input was again revisited and consolidated during the precommunicative phase, before the activities such as pair work commenced. In some classrooms weekly phrases were taught as part of the language input. The positive outcomes of such an approach were evident when pupils were given an opportunity to regularly use these phrases for the purpose of real communication, for example, when pupils were asked to undertake messages and to speak to other teachers.

Communicative activities were arranged so that new language could be practised and recreated. Appropriate situations were created that would promote real communication, so that pupils would have an opportunity to practise the Irish they had learned. The situations created were very worthwhile, for example, in shops, at the seaside, at home, and pupils looking for items that had been hidden in the classroom. Pupils had opportunities for discussion in pairs and they were

encouraged in a very effective way to use the language structures that they had learned. The pupils were eager to engage in these learning activities and they mastered the new language. In some classes the emphasis placed on teaching verbs as part of the language input was commendable. Some very worthwhile strategies were used to consolidate the language structures and verbs in a communicative and enjoyable manner.

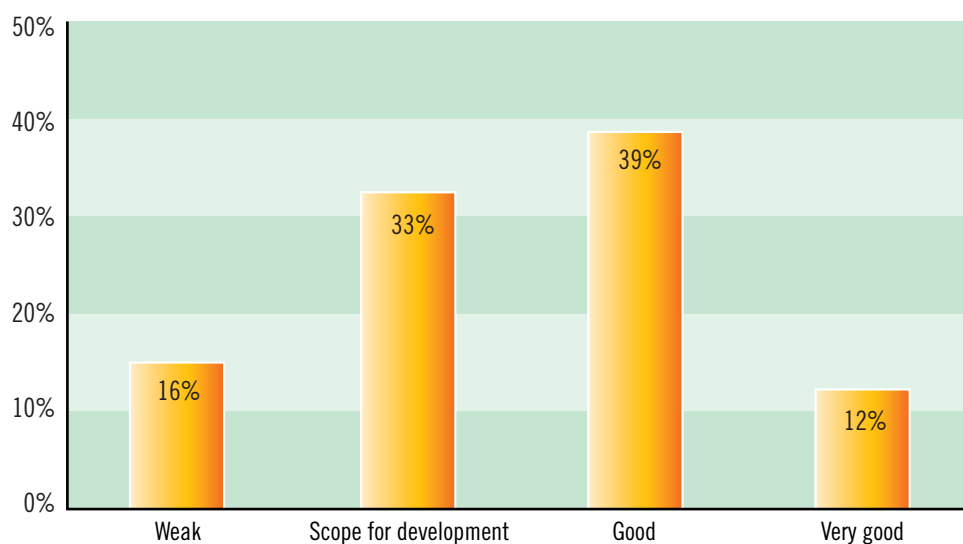
Revision and consolidation were regular features of the lessons and it was clear that there was an obvious connection between a good lesson structure and pupils' progress. The content of what was learned during these effective lessons was again revised at the end of the lessons and, in the senior classes, new contexts were created, which included writing, reading and poetry activities to once again practise the language and to ensure that pupils had internalised the content.

However, in 47% of the classrooms a focus was not placed on the phases of the lesson or on a specific language input. No specific language was taught at the beginning of the lessons in most of these classes. The communicative phase was introduced too soon and during this phase too much time was spent on games that did not have a defined linguistic purpose. These games were often not connected with the specific language input, and the learning outcomes were therefore limited. The language already taught was not used as a basis on which to build the new language input. Sufficient time was not given to forming, creating and practising language. In most of these instances the context of the conversation was restricted to the textbooks and this content was discussed with the pupils. The teacher often spent too much time on questioning. Pupils were encouraged to read extracts and they were questioned about the content, but strategies were not used to encourage further their participation. Teachers therefore engaged in most of the talking and many pupils in the classes got very little opportunity to practise speaking, which resulted in their becoming disinterested in learning. There was no regular revision of the work and only very seldom was there any assessment that might inform planning for future teaching. In many classes there were too many unconnected parts to the lesson.

4.5.2 The range of teaching methodologies

It was noted that half of the teachers (51%) made effective use of a wide range of teaching methods and appropriate materials to consolidate the new language in an enjoyable and interactive manner. A significant minority of teachers (16%) did not use a range of methodologies to cultivate a communicative approach to language learning and others were unsuccessful in the methodologies which they chose to use.

Fig. 4.6: The range of methodologies used for oral language, N=158 classes



Where good practice was clearly evident, teachers made effective use of methods such as the phrase method, the series method and the total physical response method. Puppets, concrete materials, photographs, role play, communicative games and other enjoyable activities were all used at various times. During the evaluation computer aids, pair work, drama, discussion, independent composition and a wide range of language games were skillfully used to encourage pupils to communicate effectively with each other. In those classrooms where good practice was observed, poetry, rhymes, stories and songs were often used as a valuable source for providing a rich and enjoyable language input. This worked particularly well when the poems, songs or stories selected were connected with the theme of the lessons. Pupils had many enjoyable opportunities to recite the repertoire of rhymes and songs. Pupils often, during normal communication, used some of the phrases learned in this manner.

Enjoyable language drills were used effectively. Pupils' understanding of new language was thus developed and they were given an opportunity to acquire the new language systematically. During the inspection pupils were given many opportunities to practise the target language interactively. Published material based on the target language was often used effectively as an aid to teaching and learning. The phrases and the vocabulary were written on flashcards and used during the lesson to assist pupils to internalise the language in different contexts.

In 49% of the classes it was noted that a range of methodologies was not used to consolidate the work, or to respond to pupils with specific needs. Pupils were therefore often dependent on the written words in the textbook when they were trying to answer questions or to communicate on a basic level. These teachers often translated the text to English or pupils were asked for the

translation while discussion was taking place during the lesson. Pupils in these classes were not engaged actively through Irish while learning Irish.

Vocabulary was often taught during a lesson without teaching the associated language structures. Sometimes too much emphasis was placed on naming items but pupils did not have many opportunities to use these words in a communicative context. In some classes pupils knew a good range of nouns without knowing sufficient verbs and prepositions that are fundamental in order to communicate. It is not surprising therefore that most pupils in those classes were unsure of how they might use the vocabulary they had learned.

4.5.3 Differentiation

A key curriculum principle is that the teaching and learning process should be child-centred. It is recognised that pupils learn in different ways and that pupils vary according to their abilities to learn. In any classroom, irrespective of whether it is a single-grade class or a composite class the learning programme should be differentiated to meet the various learning needs of the pupils. Teachers should be cognisant of these various learning needs when they choose content and teaching methodologies.

The manner in which lessons are structured is important in order to be able to respond to the differentiated needs of pupils. In those classes (50%) where teachers were attentive to the range of abilities within the class pupils were making progress that was appropriate to their ability levels. The teachers' focus on a particular range of language and the variety of strategies and resources used to teach the language was very beneficial to the pupils. It also was helpful to them that they had regular opportunities to practise the language in a pleasant and communicative manner. However, in those classes where too much emphasis was placed on textbooks and where there was no consolidation of a specific target language, the weaker pupils had significant difficulties in acquiring the language. They frequently did not participate in the lessons.

4.5.4 Drama

The highest point of achievement for a child in acquiring a language is that he/she creates the language him/herself. To create language the newly acquired language needs to be blended with the language previously learned. This process requires motivation and when the teacher provides the appropriate support the new language structures are more readily acquired (Baker, 1998). The new language needs to be learned in new contexts in which the language is used authentically. Drama, in particular, can provide such a context. Drama is acknowledged as an important part of the learning process. While drama activity through Irish is situated largely within the *Primary School Curriculum: Drama*, drama is not emphasised in the Irish curriculum as a means for consolidating language. It is recommended that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)



review this approach and restate the centrality of drama as a significant dimension to language learning in the Irish class.

Inspectors noted that pupils enjoyed drama very much regardless of the context in which it was used. It was also evident that in most classes (94%) there was little emphasis placed on drama. Where optimal practice in regard to the teaching and learning of Irish was taking place, drama was a significant element of the teaching. There was evidence in a few classes that the teachers were creating their own excellent drama sketches which they then used effectively with their classes. These drama sketches undoubtedly helped the pupils to learn by heart some useful aspects of the language and to grasp the rhythm of the language. In the classes that were most effective pupils added in a creative manner to the drama, frequently drawing on interlanguage. The drama elements were to the fore and language was being actively learned. On the whole what was being learned through the drama extract was connected with a specific new body of language. One inspector stated:

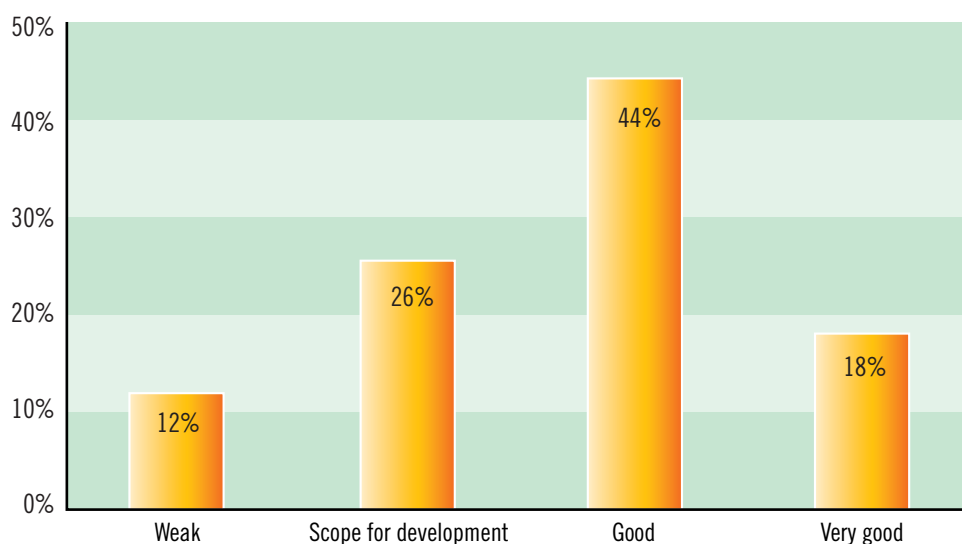
Many of the key curriculum messages are being skilfully implemented and this is evident in what pupils have learned. Their listening and oral language skills are formally developed. Specific content is used and there is an appropriate language structure to the lesson so that pupils enjoy opportunities to actively engage in their own learning. Pupils have valuable opportunities to practise their own Irish and to engage in real communication. The teacher emphasises drama as a medium of teaching and learning and a very high standard of drama is displayed in the class.

4.5.5 Enjoyment and participation in oral language

A key curriculum principle is that pupils are active and participate in their own learning. During the evaluation teachers and principals often remarked that they were of the opinion that the pupils, particularly those in the junior classes, were finding the Irish lessons more enjoyable since the *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge* was introduced and implemented.

In 62% of classes pupils were actively engaged in learning Irish. Inspectors noted that pupils in those classes were fully involved in their own learning. The highest levels of participation were evident in infant classes. Teachers in these classes often availed of a range of varied activities that supported a natural involvement of pupils in the lessons, for example drama and recitation.

Fig. 4.7: Pupils' participation in and enjoyment of Irish lessons, N=157 classes



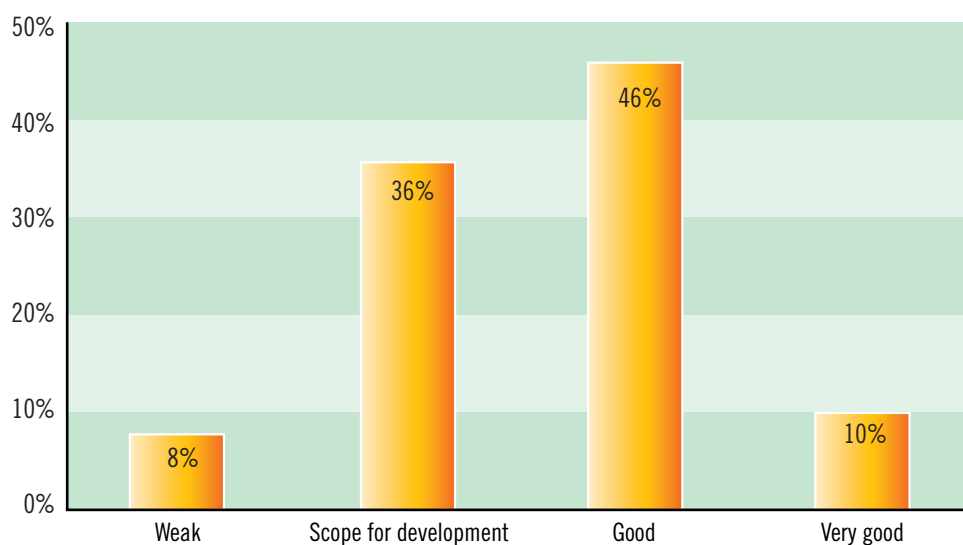
It was obvious that the success of the work was dependent on the suitability and clarity of the activities and the learning objectives. Pupils were observed really enjoying Irish because there was a clear structure to the lessons that gave them opportunities to acquire and use specific language to communicate with each other. In these classes where pupils were enjoying learning, the teachers used a lively, interactive approach to consolidate some particular aspects of the language.

However, in classes where teacher talk predominated, and where questioning was the only method of encouraging the participation of pupils, it was noticeable that lessons were often uninteresting and monotonous. Pupils had very little involvement in these lessons. When there was no connection between the language content of the various segments of the lesson pupils were learning very little. In some classes there was often too much emphasis on colouring activities in textbooks – an activity from which pupils derived little satisfaction.

4.6 Pupils' speaking ability

During the lessons pupils in 56% of the classes succeeded in answering the questions posed by the teacher about the lesson content. The pupils also had the ability to pose questions and to use relevant vocabulary when suitable topics were being discussed. In 44% of classes, however, the pupils had difficulties in communicating in Irish or in continuing a conversation themselves on the content of the lesson. The teachers in some of these classes had a lot of difficulty in implementing the communicative approach. Where a satisfactory standard was not being attained (8% of classes), pupils had significant difficulties speaking about the content of the lesson and answering open questions. Suitable settings that would promote real communication, allowing pupils opportunities to practise Irish, were not created in those particular situations.

Fig. 4.8: Number of classes in which pupils displayed appropriate attainment in spoken Irish (based on the topic being discussed in the classroom), N=156 classes



4.6.1 Opportunities for learning outside the Irish lesson

Linguists recognise the value of having contexts for using the language other than the formal language time allocation. They also agree that the best way to do this is to teach another aspect of the curriculum through the target language. In this evaluation 22% of teachers said that they taught other aspects of the curriculum through Irish. Physical Education, Music and Visual Arts were the subjects where this most usually occurred. There is no evidence to confirm how often or how regularly this approach is used, although during the evaluation excellent practice was observed in a few schools. School staffs need to agree on the value of such practice and to identify strategies by which pupils' ability in Irish can be developed. It would be helpful to teachers if a booklet was prepared to support them in implementing such practice when teaching lessons in other subject

areas of the curriculum. This booklet would focus on the vocabulary and the phrases that would relate to the other curricular areas.

It is very beneficial when learning Irish if the target language is used as the medium of instruction for classroom and school management. Almost every teacher indicated during the evaluation that they used Irish in class management situations. It was mentioned that Irish was used when calling the roll, and at break time and lunchtime to give simple instructions to the pupils. One inspector described this good practice as follows:

The teacher speaks Irish very fluently and very naturally and it is evident that she regularly uses Irish for instruction and communication in classroom management.

4.7 Summary

The teaching of listening skills, on a formal basis, was weak or fair in the majority of classrooms evaluated (52%). Inspectors noted that there was usually no specific objective to the activities organised and there was little development or progression of the work which had been completed previously. A narrow range of listening activities was provided and there were few resources used to develop these skills.

There was good practice evident in the teaching of poetry, stories and rhymes in the majority of classes (59%). This good practice contributed to the development of pupils' phonological awareness, and their understanding and familiarity with the pace and rhythm of the language. However, in one third of classrooms the pupils were unable to recite a range of poems and they had experience of only a limited repertoire of poems.

More than two-thirds of teachers used Irish as the language of communication (68%) while teaching the Irish lessons. The pupils in most classes displayed an appropriate level of understanding of the language used during the listening activities. In almost one-third of classes, however, English was used while teaching Irish. This gave pupils little opportunity to gain an understanding of Irish as a living language, and their speaking, listening and understanding skills were not appropriately developed.

More than half the teachers accorded commendable attention to the structure of the Irish lesson and to teaching specific language skills. Where good practice was observed commendable emphasis was placed on using a range of methodologies and consolidating the language that had been taught. Drama was identified as one of the most effective approaches for teaching Irish. One-fifth of teachers stated that they taught another aspect of the curriculum through Irish. Teachers in almost all classes reported that classroom management routines such as greeting pupils, preparing to go to the school yard and roll call were organised through Irish.



Almost half of the teachers experienced difficulties in structuring their lessons, in identifying the new language they were teaching and in providing pupils with opportunities to practise and develop these language skills. In half the classrooms the pupils had difficulties in talking about the lesson content, and it was evident that pupils in slightly less than half the classes (44%) failed to attain an appropriate standard of spoken Irish.

4.8 Recommendations

The following is a summary of the recommendations made by inspectors regarding listening and speaking:

Professional development of teachers

- Appropriate continuing professional development should be provided for teachers in the teaching of Irish and teachers experiencing difficulties should receive intensive supports.
- Additional inservice courses should be provided for teachers to assist them in developing effective language teaching skills. In particular, additional training based on the communicative approach is required for teachers.
- Curriculum advisers should work collaboratively with teachers in classrooms to demonstrate the three phases of the Irish lesson and to support teachers who experience difficulties teaching Irish.

Curriculum

- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment should examine how drama, poetry and story could be integrated more formally into the Irish curriculum.

Teaching approaches and methodologies

- A wide range of teaching methodologies is required for the listening strand in order to consolidate the work on content areas, to promote the participation levels of pupils, and to respond to their varying linguistic needs.
- Pupils' listening skills need to be developed systematically through planning for specific language tasks and providing a clear focus for pupils before they engage in listening activities. The principal and the teaching staff should ensure that listening skills are developed progressively from class to class.
- More poetry should be taught and more emphasis should be placed on story as a means of extending the language repertoire of pupils.
- Teachers should avoid translating during Irish classes.
- More attention needs to be directed to the use of the communicative approach, particularly in regard to having three periods in the language lesson, and ensuring that sufficient time is provided for the teaching and consolidation of new language.
- It is recommended that particular emphasis be placed on creating situations where pupils would create language themselves. Drama should have a central place in lessons.
- Formal listening activities should be organised on a regular basis, ensuring that there is a rich variety of language in use. A clear learning objective should be specified for every listening activity to ensure that pupils' listening skills are developed systematically.

School-based planning

- Schools need to identify objectives for the development of pupils' competencies in language at each class level so that there is continuity in the acquisition of pupils' language skills from class to class.
- It is recommended that principals and teachers of individual schools review their practice in relation to the teaching of Irish and identify in their school plan additional contexts that could be developed to promote the informal use of spoken Irish. It would be very worthwhile for schools to teach aspects of other subjects through Irish so that an additional context can be created for the use of Irish.

- Whole-school plans for Irish should be reviewed to ensure that opportunities for the promotion of story, poetry and song be included as core elements of the language input in oral Irish lessons.
- Schools should pay more attention to the target language (phrases and language structures as well as vocabulary) that pupils are taught to use at each class level. This should be outlined clearly in the whole-school plan for each class level and specific strategies should be identified for the implementation of the target language.

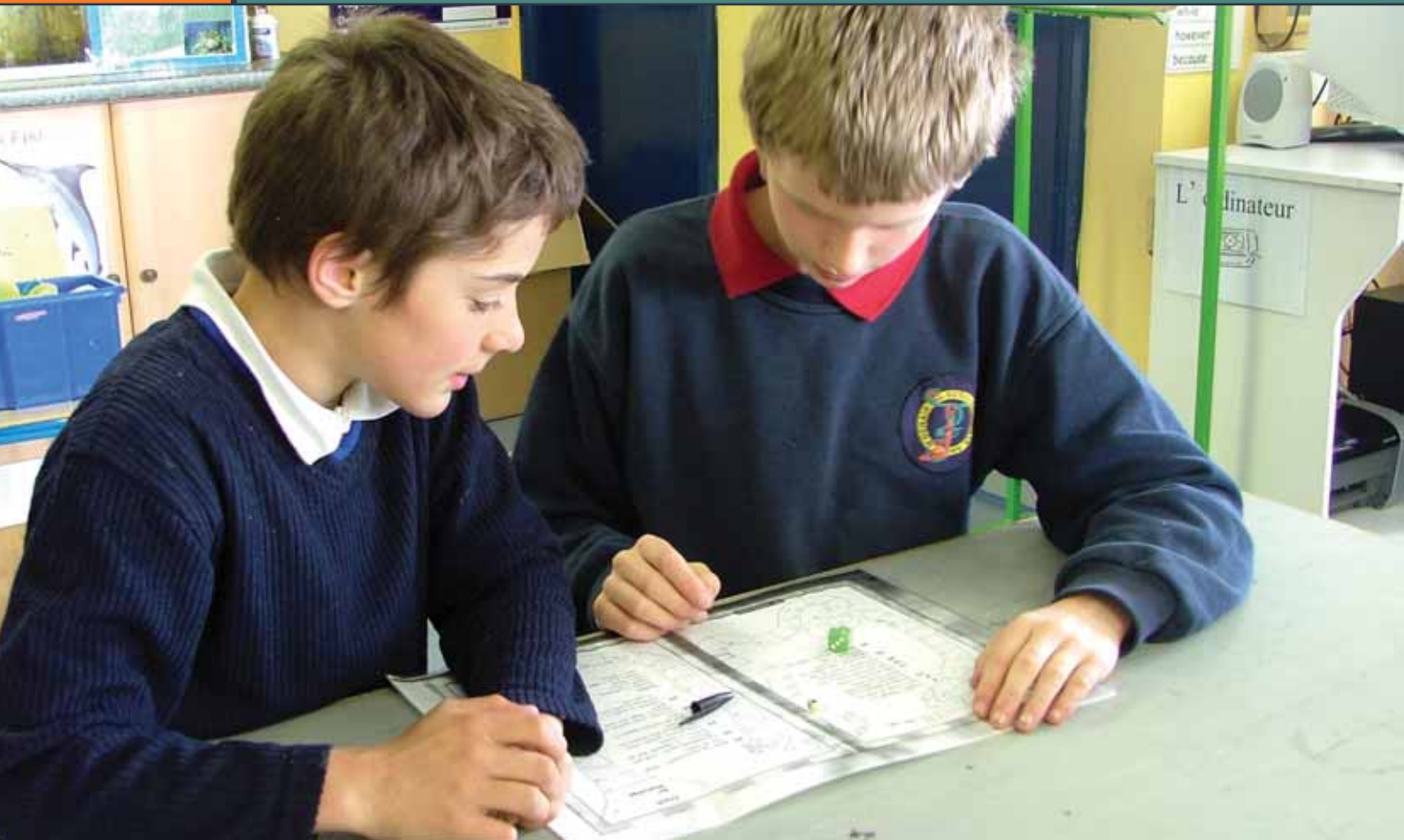
Resources

- More teaching materials should be provided in classrooms and the range of resources available for the development of listening skills and oral language skills should be extended. An integrated language programme similar to *Séideán Sí* (currently in use in Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools) should be developed to support the systematic implementation of the communicative approach.
- Schools should ensure that plenty of visual materials, concrete materials and printed resources are provided to support pupils in acquiring the new language.



Chapter 5

Teaching and learning: reading and writing



5.1 Reading in the curriculum

The *Primary Curriculum: Gaeilge* (Department of Education and Science, 1999) emphasises the importance of reading in the learning of Irish. Hickey (2001) cites international research which shows that reading, in particular reading that is freely undertaken, develops a greater competence and a wider vocabulary in the second language. The *Primary Curriculum: Gaeilge-Guidelines for Teachers* (p.125) outlines the main reasons why children read in a second language: “mar thacaíocht do na scileanna eile, i gcomhair pléisiúir, chun eolas a bhailiú agus mar léitheoireacht fheidhmiúil a mbeidh toradh éigin uirthi” [...to support the other skills, for pleasure, to acquire information and to undertake functional reading for specific purposes].

Although the curriculum emphasises the integration of all strands when teaching and learning the language, it is acknowledged that there are sub-skills and strategies that pertain to each particular strand. Pupils already have a few years’ experience developing basic reading skills in English before they begin to read in Irish. It is essential, however, to attend to the sounds in Irish and to teach the syntax and structure of the language in order to prepare pupils to read in Irish. Pupils also need a wide range of vocabulary and they need to understand the flow of the language.

Although pupils begin formal Irish reading in second class, work takes place before then to prepare them for reading. Listening skills encourage a greater understanding of the language and pupils’ interest in reading is encouraged by reading stories, using language-experience charts, using large print books and library books, and by making labels and notices.

5.2 Teaching and learning: reading

5.2.1 Developing an interest in reading

Developing the interest of pupils in reading is a very important element of the teacher's role when teaching Irish as a second language. Pupils should have opportunities to listen regularly to the teacher reading stories and poems aloud. They should also be enabled to derive meaning from written texts in their immediate environment, to frequently peruse a wide variety of reading materials and to spend periods reading silently for leisure and enjoyment.

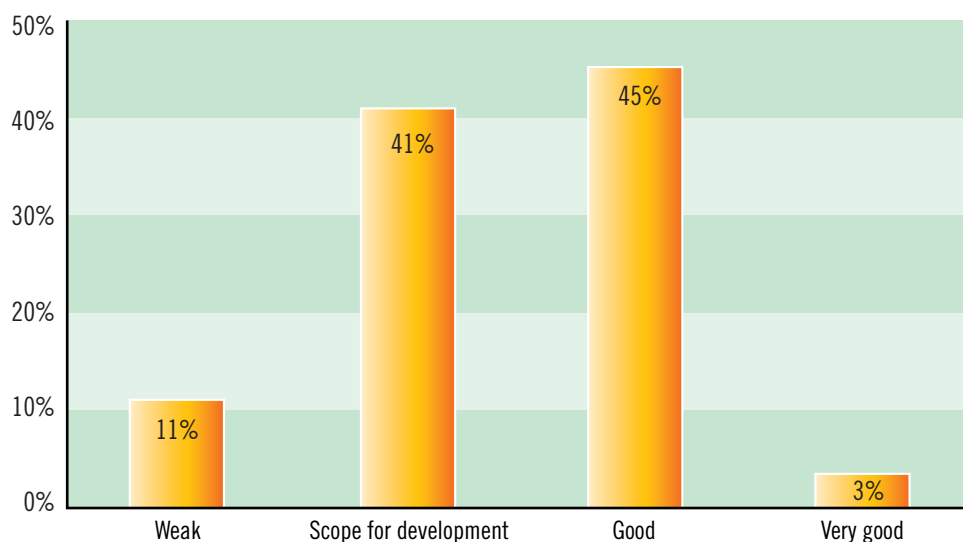
In 59% of the classes evaluated there was good practice evident in regard to reading stories and poems for pupils. However, this good practice usually occurred in the infant and junior classes. Only very rarely in the middle and upper classes was provision made in teachers' plans for reading stories to pupils. In 12% of classes significant difficulties were observed regarding the practice of reading stories and poems to pupils. This resulted in pupils having very little opportunity to enrich their language by listening to, or understanding, reading as an enjoyable activity.

5.2.2 Variety in the reading texts

An environment conducive to promoting an interest in reading was evident in 65% of the classes. In their reports inspectors referred to the wide range of printed materials in these classes – labels, charts and vocabulary pertaining to the themes being discussed, and poems that the pupils had learned. It was recommended, however, that more emphasis be placed on displaying full sentences in Irish in the classroom and creating an Irish language print environment to facilitate practice in early literacy.

Despite the significant increase in recent years in the availability of books printed through Irish, the number of Irish reading books available in class libraries was limited. Pupils therefore had little opportunity to look at a wide selection of reading material, or to enjoy periods of silent reading. In 52% of the classes evaluated pupils needed to have more challenging texts available to them. Reading activities in most classes were based on the textbooks which were essentially workbooks. Although the reading tasks included in these textbooks varied, and the pupils often undertook such work eagerly and enjoyed them, they often learned very little from these activities.

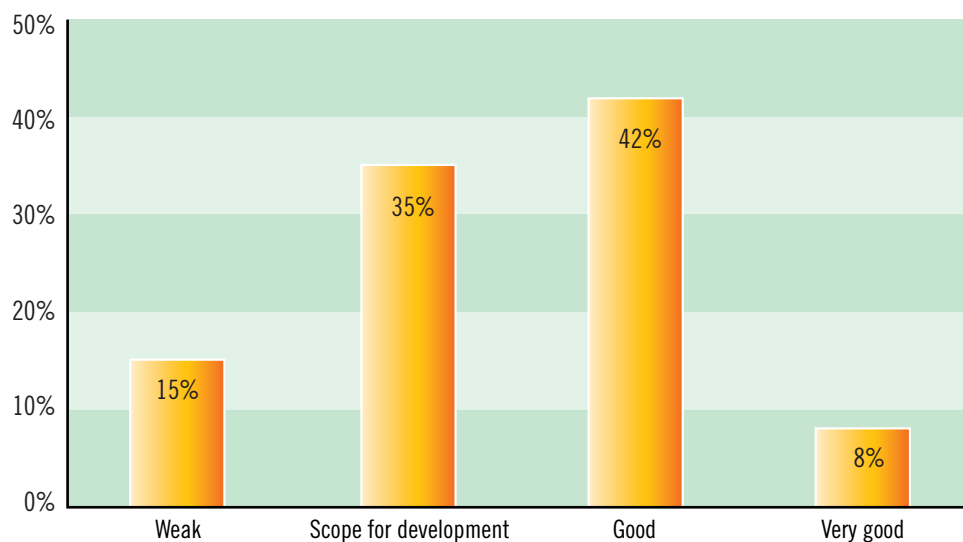
Fig. 5.1: Use of reading schemes and of a wide range of reading materials during reading lessons, N=98 classes



In 48% of the classes, although there was good practice in place regarding the appropriateness of the reading material, inspectors often referred to the narrow selection of reading texts available to the pupils. Real books were in use during the reading activities in only a very few classes. Pupils had, therefore, only limited opportunities to respond to characters and events in stories which is a stated requirement in the objectives outlined in the curriculum.

5.2.3 Teaching reading

Formal reading activities occurred in only some lessons observed in the middle and senior classes. In order to further understand teachers' approaches to the teaching of reading the inspectors examined the planning work on establishing and consolidating pupils' reading skills. Good practice was evident on the teaching of reading in half the classes. In 50% of classes inspectors noted that a wide range of teaching methodologies was used, as depicted in figure 5.2. Best practice in the teaching of reading was, however, only observed in 8% of the classes.

Fig. 5.2: Provision of a wide range of teaching methodologies for reading, N=68 classes

In the classes where best practice was observed the evidence from planning work and from inspectors' observation of teaching was that new vocabulary was very clearly taught, words were broken down and practised in a structured and continuous way, and the content of the reading material was discussed in an appropriate way before and after the actual text was read. Pupils in some classes managed, as a result of this approach, to identify difficult words by using phonic skills, context clues, and by breaking the words into syllables. Such good practice in one class was described as follows:

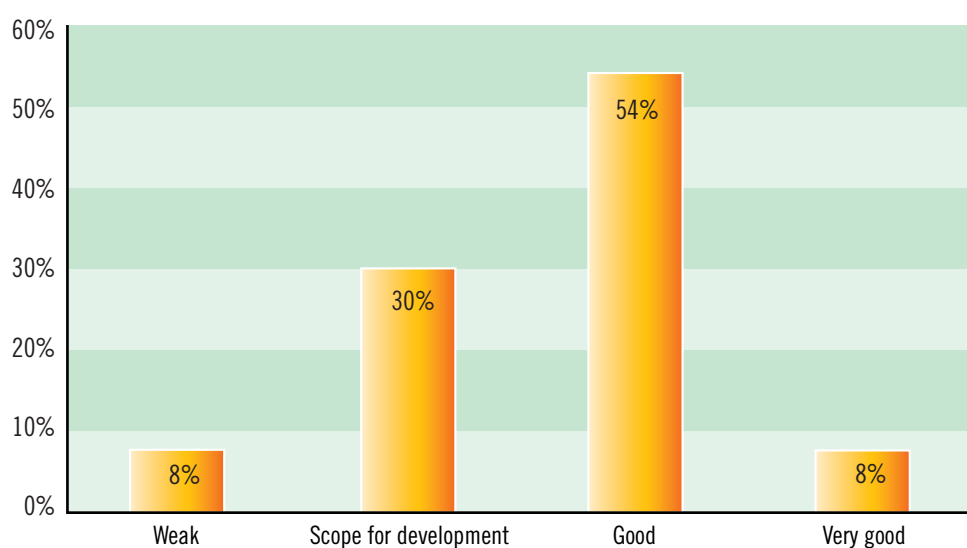
Different texts prepared by the teacher were used for reading and for drama. She used comics/newspapers, as well as stories and rhymes as reading material. She prompted an interest in the material. A variety of teaching skills is taught and the pupils are active in the reading process as they attempt to understand the text.

In 35% of classes the approach to teaching reading skills needed further development and in 15% of classes significant difficulties were apparent in the teaching of reading. In some of the junior classes it was evident that no provision was made in the teacher's work plan for beginning reading. It was a matter of concern also that reading skills were not formally taught in some middle and senior classes. This left pupils attempting to read extracts in their textbooks with no skills development other than the reading skills they had already acquired when learning to read in English. They often found Irish reading frustrating. Inspectors also stated that group work was practised very rarely when teaching reading which left some of the more able pupils unchallenged. Provision was not made either for pupils who had difficulties acquiring basic reading skills.

5.3 Pupils' reading ability

In 62% of classes pupils displayed an interest in, and understanding of the reading material around them. This reflects well on the positive attitude that the majority of teachers have developed in regard to reading. However, 38% of classes displayed a lack of interest in, and understanding of, reading. Pupils in 8% of classes had significant difficulties with interest levels in reading.

Fig. 5.3: Pupils' interest in and understanding of the reading material in their learning environment, N=111 classes



In the majority of classes (57%) it was noted that pupils used a range of skills for word recognition and to derive meaning from text. There was, however, little discussion of the reading content either before or after engaging with the text.

In approximately one-third of classes pupils had significant gaps in their skills of word recognition and reading comprehension. In general these pupils relied on graded reading pieces from textbooks and workbooks and pupils read aloud to practise their pronunciation. The reading lessons focused on practising the selected text and answering closed questions. There was little emphasis placed on teaching a wide range of reading skills.

Pupils in 11% of classes displayed significant difficulties with the skills that help them to recognise words and to derive meaning from text: this was not surprising considering that these skills were not formally taught in 15% of the classes observed (see figure 5.2). Pupils in some classes had difficulty reading common verbs such as "chuaigh" and "tháinig" and they did not manage to identify in texts the vocabulary which they had already learned in the oral language activities.

The poor standard of much of the reading material in use in classes was disappointing. The learning material was not sufficiently challenging in many cases. In the senior classes in particular it was noted that the full extent of the curriculum objectives in regard to the purpose and content of reading was not realised. In general, it appears that pupils learned very little new language during the reading activities.

5.4 Writing in the curriculum

The *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge* (p.6) acknowledges that writing is a communicative activity. “Is tríd an scríbhneoireacht a bhreacaimid síos ár gcuid smaointe agus ... a roinnimid iad le daoine eile” [It is through writing that we record our thoughts...and share them with other people]. A good foundation in language is required in order to write effectively in Irish. The ability to spell as well as to understand the difference between a sound and a letter is important, i.e. between the sound itself and its representation in written form. As well having a basic vocabulary, the writer needs to be able to manage the structure and form of individual words effectively. To achieve a high standard, the writer must understand how the written language functions socially and must be sensitive to the reader. The context can, of course, be very limited as pupils rarely see Irish written in their own environment. Unlike other major languages the school is therefore the only context in which pupils have contact with Irish literacy. This influences how pupils experience literacy in the language.

The *Primary School Curriculum: Gaeilge* clearly states that, by the time they reach the senior classes, a high standard of writing is expected in pupils' written work. Pupils are expected to write extracts that are varied, inspiring and challenging. It is also expected that pupils will write for different types of readers and listeners.

5.5 Teaching and learning: writing

5.5.1 Developing an interest in writing

In classes where a high standard of writing was achieved in Irish (51%), a lot of the writing activity was based on the pupils' environment so that a realistic context could be created. Posters with grammar rules were displayed, and these were adjusted to suit the pupils' language needs. In classrooms and in corridors many whole sentences, and complete stories and poems were visible. Pupils' written work was displayed and celebrated.

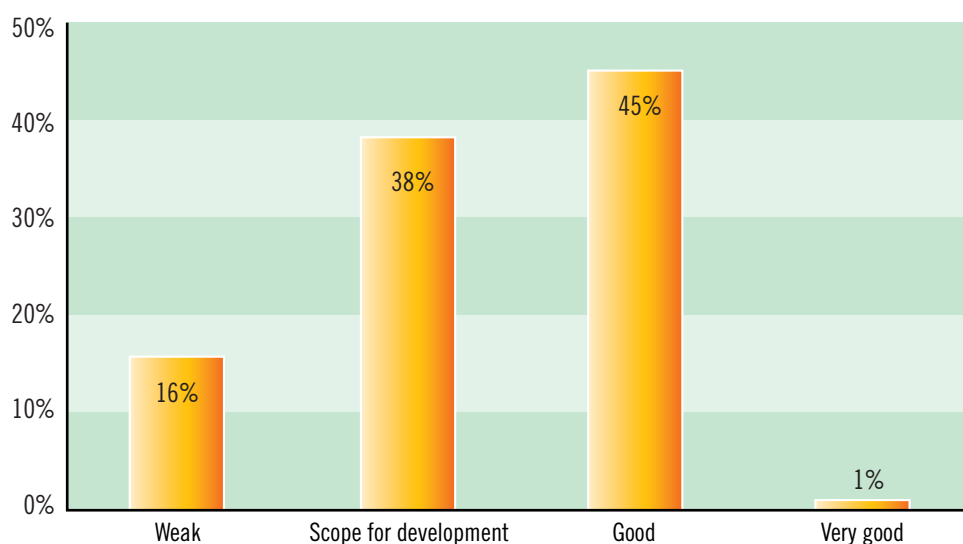
However, in a significant number of schools (35%), there was little visible evidence of written Irish. Very often the posters on display contained word lists with a translation alongside the words. On those occasions when Irish writing was displayed on the walls this often only included one-word

labels (nouns). It is recommended, in such cases, that the visual representation of written Irish be increased in the school environment as a support to the practice of writing.

5.5.2 Teaching writing

Pupils learn basic writing skills, as in reading, before they begin to write in Irish in second class. During the evaluation, inspectors observed few lessons devoted mainly to the development of effective writing practice. Rather, a writing exercise usually followed at the end of a lesson. The writing extract was used to end the lesson but only rarely was there a clear linguistic objective to this part of the lesson.

Fig. 5.4: Use of methodologies for teaching writing, N=92 classes



In 54% of the classes the writing activities observed lacked focus and purpose. Most exercises were drawn from pupils' workbooks and were based on lower order skills such as crosswords, word searches, answering literal questions, colouring exercises or filling gaps. It was obvious that pupils enjoyed these writing exercises. Most pupils were able to complete the work without difficulty but there was often very little challenge attached to the work, particularly for able pupils. Pupils completed the writing task which fostered their self-confidence. It appears, however, that they learned very little in terms of new language during these activities.

Good or very good practice in the development of functional writing skills occurred in less than half (46%) of classes. A clear emphasis was placed on spelling, pronunciation and the structure of the Irish language in these classes. In classes where a good teaching standard prevailed many samples of pupils' written work were evident in their copybooks and much of the work done was of a high

standard. The basics of writing were developed effectively and pupils managed to engage with some limited activities connected with the content of oral language work. The emphasis on teaching grammar in senior classes was commendable. Very high standards in the teaching of writing were only observed in 1% of classes. In these classes attention was focused on a wide range of practices that helped to establish, enrich and develop pupils' writing skills. The work was integrated effectively with oral work, and attention was focused on discussion, grammar, and on organising and extending the pupils' vocabulary.

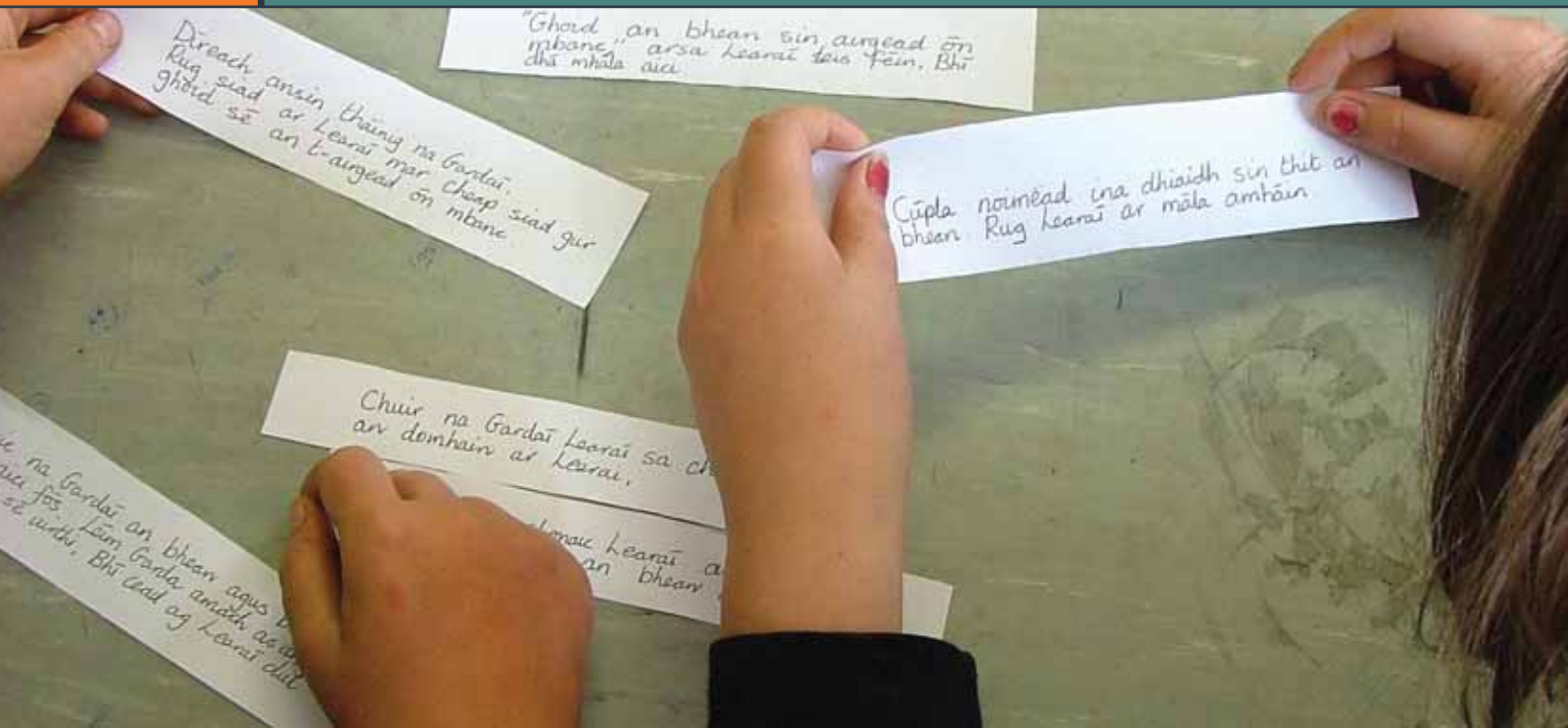
5.5.3 Variety in writing texts

The curriculum acknowledges that pupils' writing ability develops when the teacher acts as a facilitator to record their ideas and when pupils are carefully directed by the teacher as they engage in the writing activities. In a small number of those classes observed, support provided by the teacher was very helpful in enabling pupils to write regularly and to create a variety of texts. An inspector described the good practice observed in one classroom:

Good work is taking place in this class. Plenty of writing is being undertaken. Pupils have an opportunity to write regularly. They record a daily diary. They regularly write stories. A collection of poems is on display in the class. One particular group wrote a dialogue between two people. The work in the copybooks is excellent.

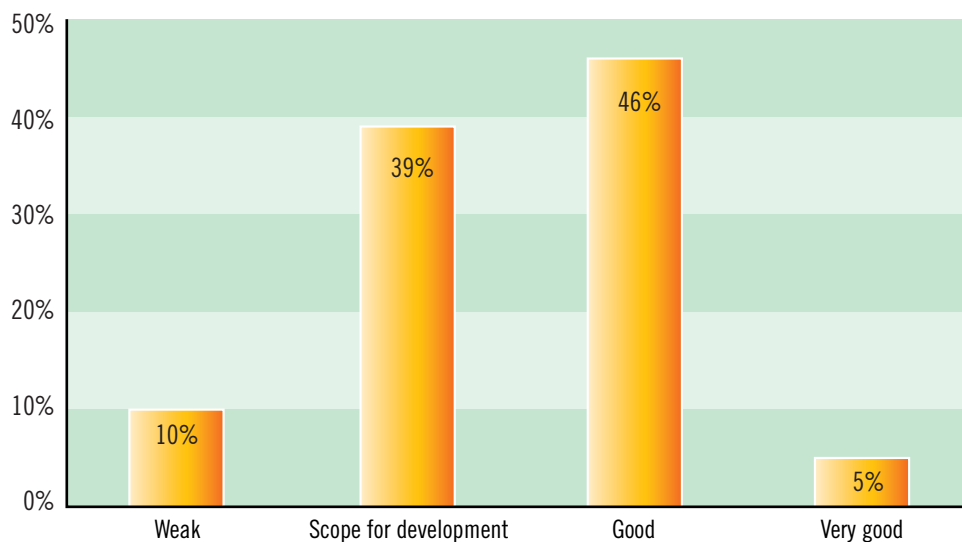
In a small number of classes the teacher and the pupils worked cooperatively to create a piece of writing which was largely based on the oral language lesson that had just been completed. The white-board or large pieces of chart paper were used and the teacher guided the collaborative creation of the text.

In most classes where personal writing occurred the pupils wrote brief stories. Written work was almost entirely focused on the genre of story. Information paragraphs, messages or opinion paragraphs were only written in a very small number of classes. Greater attention should be paid to the aims and the different genres of writing. It is recommended, therefore, that a wide range of texts be created in forms including stories, news, articles, project work, letters and cards. It would also be advisable to give pupils more opportunities to use the language exemplars they have learned to create a variety of texts. It is recommended that schools devise and implement a programme of work that would expand the writing experiences provided to pupils.



5.6 Pupils' writing ability

Fig. 5.5: Pupils' writing ability during writing lessons, N=98 classes



In more than half of the classes pupils wrote accurately and fluently, and displayed an understanding of the language and of the purpose of writing. In these classes the emphasis was on oral language and comprehension skills. Pupils were allowed to write without too many corrections being applied to their work. In some classes where a high standard was achieved, Irish novels and short stories were studied as a stimulus to writing. Pupils were creating poems and stories, initially with the help of the teacher, and independently at a later point. Pupils had work files and essay copybooks and they were encouraged to take pride in their written work.

A poor standard of creative work was evident in almost half the classes observed. Pupils did not manage to write short simple stories in Irish or to describe their thoughts and opinions in writing. Some pupils had great difficulty forming even one sentence that was not already available in some book they had alongside them. It appears that these pupils did not have sufficient understanding of the structure of the language or of how they might create language for themselves.

Teaching needs to focus on developing the appropriate skills. Pupils' abilities in comprehension, oral language, reading and spelling need to be broadened and developed. Additionally there needs to be an emphasis on teaching the structure and form of individual words and pupils need to acquire a wide range of vocabulary. They need to regularly experience producing language orally, reading simple texts, and creating sentences themselves. It is important to ensure that this work is done as a basis for personal writing. To respond to the needs of able pupils, attention should be directed to the development of their imagination and emotions. This evaluation confirms that schools in general are not developing these particular abilities.

5.7 Class-based assessment: reading and writing

The *Primary School Curriculum* recommends that teachers regularly assess the progress of pupils in reading and writing. However it is clear from this evaluation that literacy skills were only formally assessed in a small number of schools. At the time of this evaluation schools had no access to standardised tests to assess the achievement levels of pupils in Irish in accordance with the curriculum objectives. Teachers indicated that they assessed pupils' progress by observation but records of these observations were not available.

Pupils' progress in reading and writing should be regularly assessed and these results should be used as a reference point when work plans are being formulated. As well as assessing the attainment levels of pupils it is also important to focus on the skills used to engage with the new texts. In order to systematically assess pupils' progress in literacy it would be worth drawing on indicators to assess pupils' achievement in reading and writing at each class level. Reading and writing tasks should then be designed to ensure that work is appropriate to the range of abilities of pupils. This evaluation clearly indicated the need for appropriate standardised tests or other types of assessment instruments to help teachers assess the progress of pupils in reading and writing in Irish.

5.8 Summary

The teaching of reading was characterised as good or very good in half of the classrooms where Irish reading was evaluated. However, very good practice was observed in just 8% of classrooms. Where this very good practice was in evidence, reading skills were taught effectively using a range

of methodologies. In half of the classrooms, however, pupils' relied on the reading skills they had developed in English to assist them in reading through Irish. In these classrooms the teaching did not provide a focused structure for deconstructing words, teaching new vocabulary, developing phonic skills, or using context and the separation of syllables.

A print-rich environment was created in almost two-thirds of the classrooms. However, the range of reading materials available in half the classrooms was limited. Most teachers used commercial textbooks and workbooks as the basis of the reading programme. This limited the opportunities which the pupils had to engage in personal reading, silent reading and reading for enjoyment.

In most of the classes (62%) the inspectors reported that pupils read the class textbooks and materials with fluency and understanding. The reading materials used in these classrooms presented little challenge for the most able readers, however. In almost 40% of classrooms pupils who experienced difficulties in reading lacked motivation and interest in the lessons and significant gaps in their understanding of the written text were in evidence. Pupils' reading skills were not assessed by the classroom teachers in the schools evaluated.

The teaching of writing was good or very good in less than half the classes where Irish writing was evaluated. A very small number of lessons were described as very good. Where good practice was established a clear emphasis was placed on teaching spelling, pronunciation and the structure of the Irish language. Where poor practice was in evidence, there was a lack of structure to the lessons and the writing activities were based on developing lower order comprehension skills. The classroom environments did not adequately support the reading or writing process. The writing genres were quite limited in these classes. Most of the writing consisted of stories and simple news. The types of texts that children should write, as outlined in the curriculum objectives, were only undertaken in very few classes.

In more than half the classes pupils' writing was of an acceptable standard of accuracy and fluency. Pupils were able to answer questions and to write stories and simple poems with the help of the teacher. In those classes where best practice was in evidence the pupils wrote capably in different genres and novels were studied as a stimulus for writing. In almost half the classes there were weaknesses evident in pupils' functional writing. Some of the pupils in these classes managed to answer simple closed questions on the text but it was clear that they encountered difficulties answering questions that required a range of comprehension skills. In these classes pupils' personal writing was of a very poor standard. The pupils were unable to write simple stories and they had considerable difficulties in expressing their own ideas in writing. Pupils' writing was monitored by classroom teachers. However, there was no formal assessment of pupils' writing skills undertaken in the schools evaluated.

5.9 Recommendations

The following represents a summary of the recommendations made by inspectors regarding reading and writing:

Curriculum

- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is advised to review the guidelines for reading and writing as described in the curriculum documents. It is important to confirm the value of these activities in the context of language learning. Very specific guidelines are required which identify effective strategies to implement basic reading and writing skills and to help teachers to add to the use of vocabulary and structure while engaged in both reading and writing activities.

Professional development of teachers

- Curriculum advisers should work with teachers in first and second classes to enable them to develop emergent reading skills. Curriculum advisers should emphasise the importance of modelling the reading process using attractive reading materials.
- Teachers should be supported to use a range of methodologies to teach Irish reading from second to sixth classes. Emphasis should be placed on phonics (including word families, making words with letters and learning the sounds of letters and letter combinations), teaching sight vocabulary and a developing range of word-recognition strategies.
- Additional inservice courses should be provided for teachers to help them to teach writing. Advisers should pay particular attention to creating different writing genres and developing strategies to make pupils enthusiastic about writing in Irish.
- Assessment practices need to be developed for reading and writing both at whole-school level and at class level. Professional development courses on approaches to assessment should be provided for teachers to help them to assess pupils' reading and writing skills and then to base their work plans on the outcomes.

School based planning

- The intrinsic value of the skills of reading and writing and the support they provide to language learning should be acknowledged in school plans. A graded, structured, and challenging programme should be created for middle and senior classes and clear guidelines for teaching reading and writing should be included in the school plan. These guidelines should focus on how differentiated learning will apply to the learning activities to ensure that provision is made for the learning needs of all pupils.

- Whole-school plans should be reviewed to ensure that the approach to assessing pupils' reading and writing skills is clearly outlined. Indicators, based on the content objectives of the curriculum for reading and writing for each class level should be developed so that the attainment levels of pupils can be assessed in a structured manner.

Teaching approaches and methodologies

- It is recommended that additional teaching materials be provided in classrooms and that the resources to support reading and writing skills are extended and developed. Class libraries should have plenty of print and reading materials, and pupils should be encouraged to read books and to source information.
- Teachers should review their teaching methodologies ensuring that they are attentive to the teaching of phonics and to providing various strategies for word recognition when teaching Irish. In middle and upper classes the structure of the language should be taught systematically with particular emphasis attached to the teaching of verbs.
- Pupils should read a wide range of texts to ensure that the development of their language ability improves by reading, and attention should be focused on discussing the content of what has been read so that pupils can respond cognitively, emotionally and creatively to the text.
- Teachers at every class level should read stories regularly to their classes to provide them with a greater sense of enjoyment in learning, to help them to internalise the rhythm of the language, and to increase their range of vocabulary.
- The skills of personal and creative writing should be developed as recommended in the curriculum, and pupils should have more opportunities to create a wide range of texts based on the language they have learned.



Chapter 6

Main findings and recommendations



6.1 Main findings of the evaluation

6.1.1 Teachers' qualifications in Irish

Almost all teachers in the schools evaluated were qualified to teach Irish. It is worrying to note, however, that almost a quarter of the teachers were found to have weaknesses in their own language competency and 9% of teachers had significant deficiencies in their ability to teach Irish. These results are in line with the research conducted by Harris et al. (2006).

Many schools had structures in place to support newly qualified teachers and teachers who were not fully qualified to teach Irish during their early years teaching the language. These supports included assigning mentors to them, shadowing experienced teachers during Irish lessons, providing opportunities to work collaboratively with colleagues who had accumulated experience, and collaborative work on planning.

6.1.2 The standard of teaching and learning

While teachers generally approached the teaching of Irish with diligence, there was a good or very

good standard of teaching and learning in only half the classes. It is disappointing that excellent teaching was observed only in a very small number of classes (6%). Those teachers who had achieved the highest standard displayed a very good understanding of the teaching methodologies recommended in the curriculum. In these classes the teachers had a good standard of Irish and they created learning activities that were challenging for the pupils and that provided a comprehensive framework for learning.

It is disquieting to note that in half the classes observed the standard of teaching and learning was fair or poor. In 8% of classes significant difficulties were observed in the teaching and learning of Irish. Pupils' achievement in all four strands was particularly low in these classes.

6.1.3 Listening and speaking

The *Primary Curriculum: Gaeilge* focuses in particular on the formal development of pupils' listening skills. The formal teaching of listening skills was weak or fair in more than half of the classrooms evaluated (52%). The listening activities in these classes lacked variety and purpose. Nevertheless, pupils in the majority of classes (75%) displayed an acceptable level of understanding of what they had heard during the Irish classes. Teachers did not avail of opportunities to appropriately develop pupils' language skills because the content of the listening activities was not sufficiently challenging.

Good practice was evident in the teaching of rhymes, poetry and stories in the majority of classes (59%). However, in one third of classrooms the pupils were unable to recite a range of poems and the narrow range of *genres* they experienced was drawn solely from the textbooks and the workbooks. Stories were more frequently used in the junior classes, and teachers did not appear to understand the value of story as a source for enriching pupils' language.

In most classes observed Irish was used as the language of instruction and communication throughout the Irish lesson. Most teachers reported that classroom management routines such as greeting pupils, preparing to go to the school yard and roll call were organised through Irish. It is a cause for concern that in almost one-third of classrooms, the pupils were taught Irish through the medium of the English language. These pupils had few opportunities to experience Irish being spoken as a living language.

In more than half the classes it was clear from pupils' spoken language that they understood the structure of the language and that they were able to express themselves. In those classes where a high standard was achieved (10%) pupils were creating language independently and using it as a basis for role-play and drama. In those classes where the learning outcomes were of a high standard the new language was taught effectively, pupils had the opportunity to experience a rich linguistic environment, and pupils' targeted learning was systematically developed.

A significant cause of concern is that almost half of the teachers experienced difficulties in structuring the oral language lessons. They did not clarify what new language they were teaching and they did not provide pupils with opportunities to practise and develop the language skills they had acquired. Although pupils in most classes knew plenty of nouns they found it difficult to sustain a language flow as there had not been enough emphasis on teaching verbs and on the structure of the language. Language games were used in many classes but teachers had not reflected sufficiently on what they intended as learning outcomes for these games, and although pupils enjoyed them they learned very little from these games. In half the classrooms observed at the different class levels the pupils had difficulties talking about the content of the lesson, answering questions or forming sentences.

6.1.4 Reading and writing

The teaching of reading was good or very good in half of the classrooms in which Irish reading was evaluated. Where best practice was in evidence, reading skills were taught effectively and real books were used during the lessons. However, the reading material used in most classes presented very little challenge. The limited number of texts used restricted pupils' opportunities to engage in personal reading or silent reading and this lessened the quality of learning through reading. This was particularly so for more able pupils.

Reading skills had not been taught formally in 50% of the classrooms, and pupils were relying on the skills they had acquired in English to assist them in reading through Irish. It appeared that pupils read extracts from textbooks as an activity at the end of the lesson. There was little discussion of the content of the text and there was no evidence from these lessons, or from teachers' preparation, that attention was directed to teaching the phonology of the language. In most classes reading activities were focused on the text in workbooks. In almost two-thirds of classes pupils displayed an appropriate ability level in reading the texts that were used in the lessons. However, the reading material was not sufficiently challenging to respond to the expected standards as outlined in the curriculum.

The teaching of writing was good or very good in less than half the classes where Irish writing was evaluated. In the best classes pupils were composing poems and stories, initially with assistance from the teacher, and independently at a later point. Where poor practice was in evidence, there was a lack of structure to the lessons. The skills developed were based on lower-order writing skills. In half the classes the personal or creative writing of pupils was of a very low standard. The majority of pupils experienced difficulties in writing simple stories and they did not have enough language to express their views in Irish through the medium of writing.

Pupils were often given a writing activity as a form of closure to a lesson. Usually this entailed filling gaps in sentences or completing word matches or word searches. These activities were not

challenging for pupils and as a result there was little development of pupils' language competency. Although teachers monitored pupils' writing they did not regularly assess the development of writing skills.

6.1.5 Whole-school planning

In most of the schools the school plan was developed collaboratively. In 38% of the schools a specific teacher was identified as the coordinator for Irish and this clearly was very helpful in promoting good practice in those schools. In more than half the schools the focus on improving the standard of Irish in the school was not included or adequately addressed as a key element of the school plan. It is notable that many of the school plans had very little impact on the standard of Irish of the pupils as there was often no clear connection between the overall school plans and individual teachers' plans, or the teaching and learning in the classrooms.

In the best plans it was evident that the staff had reflected on ways in which the curriculum could be adjusted to meet the specific needs of the school. In a small number of schools an action plan formed a central part of the school plan. In these cases it was clear that teachers had examined the standard of what pupils had learned, and that they had focused on those aspects which needed further development. The plans, however, often described the key messages of the curriculum but did not provide specific guidelines to support teachers in planning and implementing their own teaching programmes in line with the curriculum. In these plans the staff did not have an agreed approach to regularly reviewing the effectiveness of their teaching with a view to improving the quality of learning.

6.1.6 Teachers' individual planning

In half the classes inspected, class teachers had developed a good or very good standard of planning. Aims and learning objectives were recorded, the intended language outcomes were stated, and the teachers had a clear understanding of the language acquisition intended for pupils. The teaching methods were noted and consideration was given to the differentiated needs of learners. Where more weaknesses than strengths were identified in teachers' planning, it was noted that individual teachers' planning was based exclusively on particular textbooks. It is worrying that teachers did not appear to have reflected sufficiently on how they might develop pupils' language skills. There was little evidence of a development in planning from one fortnight to the next in these cases.

6.1.7 Assessment and planning

Although a range of assessment methods described in the curriculum were included in the school plans and in individual teachers' plans there was little evidence that these were used in a structured

way in classes. In most classes pupils' written work was regularly monitored but the outcomes were not used to plan appropriately so that the learning activities might be adjusted to respond to the varying abilities of pupils.

6.1.8 The pupils and Irish

Teachers reported that pupils found Irish lessons more enjoyable since the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum*. Some teachers commented that while they acknowledged the positive disposition of pupils towards the language, they were concerned about the standards being achieved. Inspectors also confirmed that most pupils in the classes they had observed were actively engaged in the Irish lessons and enjoyed the learning activities. Notwithstanding the levels of enjoyment, it is a serious cause for concern that there was little learning taking place in some classrooms as some language activities had no specific learning objectives attached to them.

In 40% of schools 3% of pupils had received exemptions from learning Irish. In many schools no pupil had received an exemption and in other schools up to 9% of pupils were exempt from learning Irish. Some principals indicated that parents were anxious to have exemptions granted while their children were in primary school so that this exemption would then apply when they transferred to post-primary school. Some pupils, although they had been granted exemptions, participated in the listening and speaking activities. However, in just under half the classrooms visited, there was little purpose to the activities completed by those pupils not participating in the formal Irish lessons.

6.1.9 Support for Irish

It is very helpful when teaching Irish if there is a positive attitude to the language in the school community. In most of the schools evaluated principal teachers reported that there was considerable support for the teaching of Irish and the promotion of the Irish language. The majority of principals in the schools commented on the positive parental support for Irish. In a small number of schools, however, principals reported that some parents questioned the relevance of learning Irish if their children had difficulties with numeracy and literacy in English. Most schools organised events such as Seachtain na Gaeilge and other cultural events to celebrate the Irish language. Boards of management supported the purchase of teaching and learning materials and in a small number of schools funding was also made available for language courses for teachers in the Gaeltacht.



6.2 Main recommendations

As a result of this evaluation, the following key recommendations are made with a view to supporting the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools:

6.2.1 Teachers' competence in Irish

- The ability of teachers to speak and write Irish is an essential skill for all primary teachers. Teachers who teach Irish need to be competent, accurate and have a strong language base. It is recommended that every possible opportunity should be provided to improve teachers' competency in Irish. Teacher-education providers should ensure that newly-qualified teachers have appropriate qualifications and skills to teach the language. Where serving teachers require additional professional support, the Primary Curriculum Support Programme, the Department of Education and Science, and the board of management should ensure that teachers have access to the supports of curriculum advisers, in-service courses and Irish classes on a regular basis.
- Principal teachers are advised to ensure that mentors are identified for newly qualified teachers, and for other teachers who need support with the teaching of Irish. These mentors should be skilled teachers who are highly competent in Irish.

6.2.2 Curriculum

- A systematic, structured approach is required for teaching Irish, and teachers require clear guidelines on methodologies so that pupils' language ability can be developed in a systematic and detailed manner. It is recommended that a graded teaching programme similar to *Séideán Sí* should be prepared for each class in the primary school. This programme should include a detailed and systematic outline of the content to be taught in the themes as listed in the curriculum. The centrality of poetry, drama and story should be acknowledged and celebrated in this programme with a view to ensuring that language is established and enriched.
- Clear guidelines should be provided on effective strategies to achieve the basic skills of reading and writing. To this end it is recommended that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment prepare an additional booklet which would provide guidance on the teaching of literacy skills.
- The curriculum recommends that the communicative approach be used, and in particular that there would be three phases in the lesson. It appears that there is a lack of understanding of these three phases amongst teachers and that additional guidance needs to be provided on the communicative process.

6.2.3 Teaching methods

- Irish should be strictly adhered to as the language used while teaching Irish lessons. Irish as a living language needs to be used regularly outside the language lessons. It is recommended that Irish be widely used as a language of communication amongst teachers and between teachers and pupils in schools.
- It is important to ensure that a specific language input is an integral part of every Irish lesson and that there is a systematic development in the language taught from lesson to lesson and from class to class. There needs to be a very clear focus on language in each class, including purposeful activities that have clear linguistic objectives associated with them. Syntax needs to be taught regularly, continuously and positively, and particular emphasis should be placed on the teaching of verbs.
- A higher standard of Irish should be expected from pupils. To this end teachers need to reflect creatively and imaginatively when selecting teaching methodologies. It is recommended that a particular emphasis be placed on structuring situations where pupils can create language for themselves. Drama should play a very central role in learning.
- Pupils' listening skills need to be developed systematically, by organising specific listening tasks and providing pupils with a clear focus before they begin the listening activities.

- Teachers need to formally teach literacy skills. It is important to acknowledge that reading and writing can be very usefully applied to consolidate what has already been learned in oral language activities. It is also important to be aware that pupils experience the richness of the language through reading and writing. It is recommended that pupils should be exposed to a wide range of reading and writing experiences which would provide them with an opportunity to develop their language skills in accordance with their abilities and interests.

6.2.4 Whole-school planning

- Planning for the systematic development of Irish as a language and as an integral part of the culture of the school is recommended. The emphasis should be on improving standards, on the language skills, and on levels of achievement in each of the four strands. These objectives should be reviewed regularly so that progress and attainment are assured for each class level.
- Schools should direct additional attention on the target language (the phrases and the structures of the language as well as the vocabulary) that pupils are enabled to use at each class level. These need to be clearly delineated in the school plan for each class level and specific strategies that can be implemented in regard to the target language need to be identified.
- It is recommended that a curriculum leader be identified for Irish on school staffs. This person would be responsible for focusing on whole-school planning, for initiating a review of the implementation of the curriculum, and for coordinating the assessment of pupils' learning at each class level. It is advisable that the curriculum leader devise a whole-school plan for Irish in consultation with the teaching staff. A clear time-line needs to be agreed for the implementation of the various aspects of the school plan for Irish.
- The school plan for Irish should be reviewed to ensure that the importance of story, poetry and song is recognised as a support to the teaching and learning of a rich language.
- Schools should consider teaching other aspects of the curriculum through Irish. Clear strategies need to be recorded in the school plan which will indicate to the teacher how Irish can be used outside the Irish lesson. These strategies should pertain to strengthening the use of Irish in incidental communication throughout the day and to teaching other aspects of the curriculum through the medium of Irish.

6.2.5 Individual teachers' planning

- Teachers need to ensure that a new language input forms a core element in each week's work plan, and that opportunities are created for pupils to practise this new language and to connect it with language already learned. The most effective teaching methods need to be used to accomplish this.

- Teachers need to specify in both short-term and long-term planning how they will differentiate within their Irish programme to respond to the needs of pupils across the range of ability levels.

6.2.6 Resources

- Schools should ensure that visual resources, concrete materials and printed matter are provided to support pupils in acquiring the language. It is also recommended that a wide range of reading materials be provided so that pupils are encouraged to read books. The additional use of information and communication technologies should also be helpful in extending pupils' learning.

6.2.7 Assessment

- Guidelines should be issued to schools on the methodologies of assessing pupils' progress in Irish as a second language. This will require the development of standardised tests for assessment of pupils in Irish as a second language and the development of pupil assessment profiles for Irish that are based on the curriculum and on the various class levels.
- The school plan should indicate the particular strategies that will be used to assess and monitor pupils' progress in Irish. Each school should, in accordance with the specific context of the school, outline the proposed learning objectives for pupils at each class level. These learning objectives should be assessed with a view to identifying benchmarks for pupils' learning.
- It is recommended that teachers make regular use of specific tasks to assess the progress of individual pupils and to record the results. It is also recommended that teachers' observations of pupils are sufficiently focused so that learning activities are adjusted to suit the varying ability levels of pupils.

6.3 Conclusions

This evaluation shows that the implementation of the revised curriculum has impacted positively on the pupils' enjoyment of Irish. However, it is also clear that considerable challenges must be faced if the teaching of Irish is to be improved. If weaknesses in the teaching of Irish are not addressed in a structured way without delay, it is likely that people in the future will not be in a position to use the language naturally, or to engage with, or add to, the rich corpus of literature which forms a valuable part of the tradition of the Irish language.

It is important that Irish people have an understanding, knowledge and pride in the Irish language as an intrinsic element of their heritage and culture. It is essential that educators, policy makers, parents and members of the general public respond to the challenges presented in this evaluation report. There is a need for a collaborative approach to ensure that the recommendations in this report are implemented and that the quality of provision in the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools is improved.



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