



My experiences of bilingual education from learning and teaching in a Gaelscoil

Mo Chúlra

- Dalta i nGaelscoil Aonach Urmhumhan: 1995-2003
- Rang a Trí i nGaelscoil Aonach Urmhumhan: 2012-2013
- Tacaíocht Foghlama i nGaelscoil na Mí: 2013-2015
- Naíonáin Bheaga agus Naíonáin Mhóra i nGaelscoil na Laochra: 2015-Anois

Gaelscoileanna 

What is Bilingual Education?

The term bilingual education refers to an organized and planned program that uses two (or more) languages of instruction. The central defining feature of bilingual programs is that the languages are used to teach subject matter content rather than just the languages themselves. (Cummins, cited in Gaelscoileanna Teo 2016)



What type of bilingual education is used in Gaelscoileanna?

Immersion programs are organized and planned forms of bilingual education in which students are “immersed” in a second language instructional environment with the goal of developing proficiency in two languages. (Cummins, cited in Gaelscoileanna Teo 2016)

In Gaelscoileanna children are immersed fully in the Irish language. Irish is the language of learning for the entire curriculum. (Gaelscoileanna Teo, 2012)



Creating an environment which supports language learning

- Useful phrases displayed inside and outside with visual cues
e.g. Sa rang – ‘Conas atá tú? Tá mé _____’, ‘Caithfidh mé dul chuig an leithreas’, ‘Croch suas do chóta’
e.g. Sa chlós – ‘Ceangail m’iallacha le’ thoil’, ‘Tabhair pas dom’
- Focail Nua noticeboard – developed from children asking ‘Cad é an Ghaeilge ar_____?’
- Specific language taught before each lesson/lesson theme so that it can be used throughout the lesson
- Sending notes home in both Béarla and Gaeilge
- Providing phrases for parents to use when writing a note to the múinteoir e.g. ‘Bhí _____as láthair mar _____’
- Providing audio recordings of Irish books so that parents can support their child with their reading in both languages

Immersion Education in Junior Infants

- Gaeilge only in Naíonáin Bheaga – all subjects taught through medium of Irish in Gaelscoileanna
- Gaeilge taught in a fun, natural way
- Oral language, reading and writing done through Irish
- Phonological awareness and phonics activities done through the medium of Irish
- If they ask in English, you answer in Irish!
- Lots of kinaesthetic and visual cues used to develop understanding of new language
- A focus on praise and encouragement – “Mol an Óige agus Tiocfaidh Sí”

Immersion Education in Senior Infants

- The children begin English language learning after mid-term break in Naíonáin Mhóra
- ‘Hataí Béarla’ are used during English lessons to promote the idea that their first language is Gaeilge
- Children have English and Irish reading as homework every week and use and write words from both languages
- Children have now developed their Irish to the point that it is used as their language of communication with classmates and teachers
- Children continue to be praised and encouraged when speaking Irish and when asking for new words as Gaeilge – ‘Cad é an Ghaeilge ar____?’
- Although children only begin English language learning at this stage, there is no negative impact on the development of their English language as the language skills have transferred from learning Gaeilge in Naíonáin Bheaga

Transfer of Skills across Languages

- Conventions of print across languages
 - reading: left to right orientation, top to bottom orientation, front to back orientation and identification of the title, illustrations and author of texts
 - writing: left to right orientation, top to bottom orientation, use of appropriate punctuation, spelling strategies
- Phonological awareness - being able to recognise, hear and distinguish words within sentences, syllables within words, rhyming words and words beginning with the same initial sound
- Phonics – learning letter sounds and formation of letters, blending and segmenting sounds to read and spell words
- Comprehension strategies - e.g. making predictions, creating images

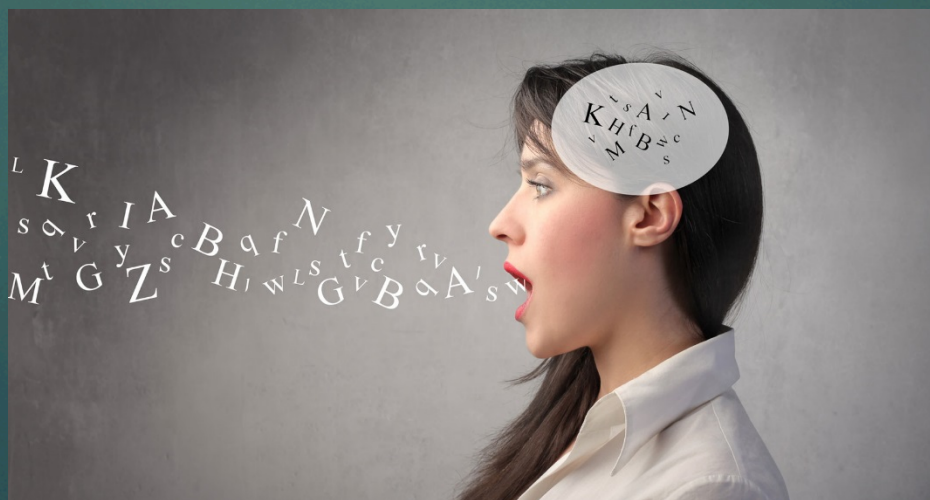
(adapted from *Primary Language Curriculum - Support Materials for Schools*)

Supporting the children's bilingual education from infant classes until they leave school

- Developing the language rich environment as the children's language develops – more complex phrases for older classes
- Continuing to provide experiences which allow them to use both languages in meaningful settings – trips to other bilingual schools, trips to Gaeltacht, writing a school newspaper as Gaeilge and as Béarla
- A focus on praise and encouragement – Gaeilgeoir na Seachtaine
- Developing their pride and confidence in their ability to speak multiple languages

The impact of bilingual education on my language learning

- I don't remember learning English or Irish – just learning language
- Languages seem to come in and out in the same way – cannot recall if I have been speaking English or Irish
- I found it easy to learn a third language and enjoy learning languages



Insights from my classroom

- I currently teach children from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are thriving in the Gaelscoil setting
- I have students who speak Chinese, German and Polish as well as English and Irish – they are trilingual!
- The parents of a child in my class who speaks fluent German have remarked that their child's proficiency in German has developed since she started learning Gaeilge
- A child started in Senior Infants with us this year who had just moved to Ireland from China and his English and Irish are developing very well – the language skills have transferred from his first language to the others!

Food for Thought

- New Language Curriculum focuses on the integrated nature of language learning
- Teach some other subjects as Gaeilge if possible
- Be confident with your Gaeilge and try not to let any negative experiences hold you back
- Praise children who offer phrases in other languages e.g. Hello as Gaeilge, in Polish etc.
- Have a phrase noticeboard in the hallway which displays common phrases in multiple languages reflecting the varied background of children in your school



References

- Gaelscoileanna Teo (2012), *Early Immersion Education in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Schools*, available: <http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie/assets/Bileog-eolais-2012.pdf> (accessed 14 Nov 2016)
- Gaelscoileanna Teo (2016), *Bilingual and Immersion Programs*, available: <http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie/assets/Bilingual-and-Immersion-Programs.pdf> (accessed 14 Nov 2016)
- DES (2015) *Primary Language Curriculum*, DES: Dublin
- Google Images (2016)



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