

Developmental Pathways in Learning Irish as a Second Language

TORTHAÍ FOGHLAMA

Forbraíonn páistí coincheapa, meonta agus scileanna i dtaca le:

- Rannpháirtíocht, éisteacht agus aird
- Stór focal a shealbhú agus a úsáid
- Tuiscint

Most children travel along predictable pathways as they learn a second language in educational settings. Irish is no exception and children learn Irish as a second language in primary school in predictable, yet individual ways.

Learning a second language can be regarded as both a cognitive and a social process, i.e., children learn a language by figuring out the system of the language through interacting with speakers of that language.

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Demonstrating Understanding

Most children need some time to realise that meaning can be made in a language other than their first language. This means that the teacher might augment speech with gestures, cues, visual aids, and concrete objects and experiences, so that the meaning is clear from the context. For example, the teacher can use beckoning gestures to ask a child to come here or show a school bag to talk about a ‘mála scoile’ or a lunch-box to refer to a ‘bosca lóin’.

In the early stages, children will be in the **silent period** as far as using the second language is concerned and will sometimes use their first language – for example, English – or remain silent. Research tells us that they should not be unduly pressurised into speaking at very early stages. Children could demonstrate their understanding by following requests or instructions. Over time, the teacher can place less emphasis on the gestures and other strategies and more on the speech alone. He/she can show that they expect more verbal responses from the children, beginning with frequently used words and phrases.

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Through dynamic scaffolding, using a variety of strategies such as accepting the child’s utterance and building on it to model the full form of the sentence, using visual aids and real objects for meaning and context

and through providing a print-rich environment, children can be supported to make progress in

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speaking Irish. The teacher can use and reuse words and phrases that the children already know, including rhymes and songs, to allow the children to gain mastery of the language structures and to use them in a variety of contexts. Activities that have a natural built-in repetition are useful, such as reading stories many times, playing board games and participating in craft activities.

Children's Response

Children may respond appropriately in English to the teacher's utterance, showing they understand what has been said in Irish.

Teacher: *Suas liom, suas liom* (singing).

Child: *Oh good. I like this one.*

Teacher: *An maith leatsa é seo?*

Child: *I love this song.*

Teacher: *Maith thú, is breá liom é.*

The teacher shows that he/she is listening to the child and continues the conversation in Irish, accepting the child's interest and praising him/her. This will bolster the child's motivation and encourage him/her to continue to enjoy the song in Irish. The teacher translates the child's sentence into Irish, showing acceptance of what he/she has said and gives input in Irish at the time of most interest to the child. As children gain in confidence and experience, the teacher could ask them to repeat the phrase in Irish.

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Mixed Sentences

Children gradually learn new words and phrases in Irish, often those that belong to the new context of school, and begin to use Irish words in an English sentence.

Child: *When will it be **am lóin**?*

Child: *Didn't I finish my **lón**?*

Child: *I need to go to the **leithreas**.*

Over time, they will gradually learn to use more frequently used words and phrases.

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The teacher can note the most frequently used Irish words and phrases and expand the children's utterances in a constructive way.

Child: *When will it be **am lóin**?*

Teacher: ***Am lóin?** Cathain a bheidh **am lóin** ann? Beidh se ann go luath.*

Child: *Didn't I finish my **lón**?*

Teacher: *Maith thú. Chríochnaigh mé mo **lón**.*

Child: *I need to go to the **leithreas**.*

Teacher: *Caithfidh mé dul chuig an **leithreas**. Seo leat.*



Regularly Used Words and Phrases

Research tells us that children learn words and phrases that are used in regular and repeated contexts by the teacher **and** other children. These routine interactional phrases could be part of games or teacher talk in tidying up or getting ready for lunch. Transferable phrases are particularly useful, such as *Cé leis é seo?* This could be used in a

matching card/bingo game and the answer, *Is liomsa é*, could also be taught.

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Teacher: *Cé leis é seo?*
(showing a matching card)

Child: *Liomsa é.*

Teacher: *Tá an ceart agat. Is liomsa é, a dúirt Marcus. Is le Marcus é.*

By using these phrases, the child can participate in the game through Irish, using his/her second language for communicative and play purposes. Children may naturally use a short version

of the sentence at first, but – by listening to the teacher using the full form – they can gradually extend to using full sentences. They should be able to insert the names of other children playing the game quite quickly, by naming them at first, but will learn the full phrase when they hear it often.

This type of conversation can be expanded by adding other closed questions about concrete objects.

Teacher: *Céard é seo?* (pointing to a banana at lunch-time)

Child: *Banana.*

Teacher: *Tá banana agam, a dúirt Áine. Tá sé sin an-deas.*

This shows that language learning is not confined to the language lesson but that other events in the day, particularly those that happen frequently, can be used as language learning opportunities.

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The teacher asks the child a question that she knows he can answer.

Creative Speech

As children gain in confidence and are comfortable with a range of words and phrases, they will be able to use more Irish in scaffolded situations.

Teacher: *Cá mbíonn an phéist?*
Ins an ... (looking at picture book)

Child: *Féar.*

Teacher: *Cá mbíonn sé?*

Child: *Ins an féar.*

The teacher asks the child a question that he/she knows the child can answer by looking at the illustration in the book. He/she knows the

child has learned the word *féar* and gives a chance to complete his/her sentence first and then to say the full phrase again. This helps develop the children's competence and confidence in using Irish.

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Summary

Understanding the process of second language learning means that the teacher can **fine tune his/her input to suit children's language level**. This gives children a good opportunity to experience success in language learning and provides the teacher with guidance on the level at which he/she should be teaching. The teacher can adapt the input in line with the children's developing competencies, incorporating their new knowledge and vocabulary and ensuring that there is sufficient repetition to consolidate language learning.

The scaffolding can change over time, but the basic principles of working with children's interests, focusing on meaning with additional supports and modelling correct forms of vocabulary and grammar, remain the same. Using these principles in repeated, predictable contexts will greatly facilitate the learning of Irish as a second language in the early years of primary school.

Working with children's interests, focusing on meaning and modelling correct forms of vocabulary and grammar in repeated, predictable contexts will greatly facilitate the learning of Irish.



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References

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