

# THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH L2 BY IMMIGRANT CHILDREN: EAL AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN MULTILINGUAL IRELAND

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1990s, Ireland has experienced considerable immigration. Currently, 12% of its schoolchildren come from immigrant backgrounds. The majority of these children learn English as a second (additional) language (ESL/EAL). The Irish Department of Education and Skills (DES) provides a programme of English language support for young ESL learners. To guide this programme, English Language Proficiency Benchmarks were developed by Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), a campus company of Trinity College, Dublin. IILT produced two sets of context-appropriate ‘Benchmarks’, for primary and secondary education, derived from the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This paper focuses on English L2 acquisition in Irish primary schools. It reports on how the primary level Benchmarks describe L2 proficiency development across CEFR levels A1, A2 and B1 in a manner sensitive to age/cognitive stage and curriculum requirements. It discusses assessment resources based on these Benchmarks – a version of the European Language Portfolio (IILT 2004) and the Primary School Assessment Kit (DES 2007). These tools enable assessment of and assessment for learning and promote learner autonomy. Research conducted by the author of this paper (published in 2014) into the relation between learning outcomes expressed in the Benchmarks and immigrant children’s English L2 acquisition is presented. It reports on mixed-methods analysis of data from a longitudinal study of L2 acquisition involving 18 children, aged four to ten years, from ten language backgrounds (including Croatian and Serbian). The children’s acquisition of English oral and literacy skills indicate that the Benchmarks appropriately describe L2 proficiency development. Individual and interactional influences on L2

acquisition and their pedagogical implications are discussed. The paper considers how CEFR-related approaches can support language learning, teaching and assessment in an intercultural educational environment.

*Key words:* language education, intercultural education, curriculum development, language assessment, teaching English as a second language, child second language acquisition, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, immigration, Ireland.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Ireland and immigration**

Ireland, a country with a long history of emigration, has experienced substantial immigration since the 1990s. Among the early arrivals were up to 1200 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina who were admitted as part of a United Nations resettlement programme for victims of conflict in the Balkans (UNHCR Ireland, 2004). Increasing numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers from other national backgrounds also sought to build new lives in Ireland. At the same time, Ireland's economy was developing rapidly and, during this so-called 'Celtic Tiger' period, employment opportunities attracted people from across the world. The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 brought a further rise in the annual immigration rate which, data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show, peaked at 151,100 in 2007 (CSO, 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

From 2008 onwards the rate of immigration slowed due to the impact of the global economic crisis on Ireland. As the country fell into recession, emigration –mostly of Irish nationals – again took precedence<sup>2</sup>. However, the results of the 2011 census reveal that immigration has far from ceased and that many immigrants have decided to stay in Ireland. At least 12% of residents are classified as 'non-Irish nationals', with 122,585 people of Polish nationality the largest 'non-Irish' group (CSO, 2012).

### **1.2 Consequences for education**

The 2011 census results further indicate that an increasing proportion of Ireland's immigrant population is aged fifteen years and younger (CSO, 2012). Therefore, as acknowledged by the Irish Department of Education (DES) and Office of the Minister for Integration (OMI) in their Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–2015, 'immigrants will remain a definite feature of the Irish education system' (DES and OMI, 2010, p.10).

Currently, it is estimated by the DES that around 12% of children at school in Ireland come from immigrant backgrounds (DES, 2011;2014). The majority of these children speak a home language other than English or Irish – the two official languages of Ireland. Consequently, as most of them attend schools in which English is the main medium of instruction, they are

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<sup>1</sup>The current population of the Republic of Ireland is 4.59 million (CSO, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> By 2013 the annual immigration rate was 55,900 (having fallen to 41,800 in 2010) with annual emigration of 89,000 (mostly of Irish nationals) recorded in that year (CSO, 2014); recent indicators suggest that net outward migration is now decreasing.

learning English as an additional (second) language (EAL/ESL) in order to engage with the school curriculum and integrate into the wider community.

## **2. Responding to diversity**

### **2.1 EAL teaching**

According to the DES ‘about 200 languages are used every day in Ireland’ (2014, p.4). The fact that Irish society has become so multilingual has significant implications for education. Clearly, it is crucial that immigrant children are enabled to acquire the language of schooling (generally English) in order to fulfil their full academic and social potential. To this end, the ‘English language support programme’ was established by the DES in the late 1990s. This programme provides EAL instruction for immigrant children during the first two years of their education in Ireland (see Čatibušić and Little, 2014 for an overview). Schools have discretion as to how this support is organised. Typically it is provided through daily EAL lessons of 35–45 minutes duration but English language support teachers may also assist children in the mainstream classroom. Even if withdrawal lessons are the sole mode of provision, EAL learners spend over 80% of their time in mainstream education during their two-year entitlement to English language support<sup>3</sup>. After their support period has ended, they must continue to develop English L2 skills without this additional language-focused assistance.

### **2.2 Intercultural education**

Another key issue in responding to linguistic and cultural diversity in Irish schools is ensuring intercultural education for all children. This involves recognising and respecting the home languages and cultures of children from immigrant backgrounds. Guidelines for intercultural education for both primary and secondary level have been produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2005; 2006). The Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–2015 (DES and OMI, 2010) has set further goals in this regard. However, implementation of this strategy has been seriously affected by Ireland’s economic problems which have led to reductions in state support for EAL and intercultural education in recent years. Nevertheless, initiatives taken in this field prior to the recession still serve as worthwhile models for responding to challenges faced by immigrant children.

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<sup>3</sup> The two-year limit on English language support was briefly rescinded in 2007 but was reimposed in 2009. Thereafter, appeals could be made for an extension of this support, based on the assessment of children’s English L2 proficiency.

### **3. A framework for English language support**

#### **3.1 English Language Proficiency Benchmarks**

The rapid transformation of schools into multilingual and culturally diverse environments was a shock to the Irish education system. A major concern among teachers was that most of them had little or no previous experience of teaching children who were non-native speakers of the language of education. Guidance and training was required in relation to EAL teaching. The DES assigned responsibility for delivering this to Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), a campus company of Trinity College Dublin which was also involved in the provision of English language support for adult migrants. An essential first step in this process was the development of two sets of English Language Proficiency Benchmarks – one for primary and one for secondary education. These were derived from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) but adapted to meet the specific language learning needs of immigrant children at school in Ireland. They provided frameworks for English language support at both primary and secondary level and served as a basis for the development of resources for EAL teaching and in-service teacher training.

#### **3.2 The Primary Benchmarks**

Since this chapter concerns the acquisition of English L2 among primary school children, it will focus on the English language proficiency benchmarks for non-English-speaking pupils at primary level (IILT, 2003), hereafter referred to simply as the Benchmarks. As pointed out above, these Benchmarks are a context-appropriate adaptation of the CEFR designed for EAL pupils in Irish primary schools. They share the same ‘action-oriented’ approach to language learning adopted by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p.9) and use ‘can do’ descriptors to describe the development of communicative skills and communicative language competences. However, there are important differences between the CEFR and the Benchmarks. The CEFR was designed with the language learning experience of adult and late adolescent learners in mind. It describes language proficiency development across six Common Reference Levels (A1 to C2) spanning four wide-ranging domains of language use (public, personal, educational and occupational). The Benchmarks, on the other hand, are much narrower in their focus. Considering the L2 learning needs of EAL pupils at primary school in Ireland, they concentrate on the educational domain.

In addition, the Benchmarks cover only the three lower Common Reference Levels of the CEFR (A1, A2 and B1). Given the cognitive range of children at primary school, this restriction is necessary and appropriate. From level B2 upwards, many of the CEFR descriptors relate to academic or vocational uses of language which are beyond the cognitive abilities of most primary school children. Also, as the Benchmarks serve as guidelines for a two-year programme of English language support, progression from level A1 to level B1 seems a realistic target to be attained within this limited period. It also reflects the purpose of the Benchmarks: to ‘specify the minimum proficiency required for full participation in mainstream schooling’ (IILT, 2003, p.3). Setting B1 as an exit level does not mark an end-stage in the child’s ongoing acquisition of English L2. Rather, it recognises that at this level the learner may be considered an ‘independent user’ of the language he/she is learning (Council of Europe, 2001, p.23) who can function in an L2 environment without direct assistance.

Another fundamental feature of the Benchmarks is that they are deeply rooted in the Irish Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999). Designed in consultation with teachers, they focus on key themes which recur across the curriculum. Therefore, the Benchmarks may be viewed as a ‘curriculum-within-the-curriculum’ (Little, 2010, p.19) which addresses the specific needs of EAL pupils. Furthermore, taking into account the age range of children in primary education in Ireland (from four to twelve years), the Benchmarks are expressed in a manner that allows their flexible application to pupils of different ages and stages of cognitive development. They thus recognise children’s ‘individual pathways of learning’ (IILT, 2003, p.4) which may also be affected by their home language backgrounds, learning styles and previous educational experience<sup>4</sup>.

### **3.3 Basis for language learning, teaching and assessment**

The Benchmarks ‘can do’ descriptors express anticipated L2 learning outcomes for EAL pupils. As such, they suggest suitable teaching activities and can be used as criteria for assessment. The Benchmarks have also served as a core document in the development of further resources for EAL teaching and intercultural education. These include the teachers’ handbook *Up and Away* (IILT, 2006) which outlines a wide range of classroom activities, explains aspects of second language acquisition, and highlights the importance of home language maintenance and engagement with immigrant parents.

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<sup>4</sup>The *Benchmarks* and their associated resources are available at [www.ncca.ie/iilt](http://www.ncca.ie/iilt).

Assessment tools based on the Benchmarks have also been produced. The European Language Portfolio, Primary (IILT, 2004) is a version of the CEFR-linked European Language Portfolio (ELP) specifically designed for EAL pupils in Irish primary schools. Essentially, it is a child-friendly, edited version of the Benchmarks which uses ‘I can’ descriptors for guided self-assessment. Its ‘passport’ and ‘biography’ sections enable both summative and formative assessment, while its ‘dossier’ section facilitates the storage of evidence of the child’s English L2 development. By encouraging reflection on the learning process and the setting of new goals, use of the Primary ELP can thus promote learner autonomy. To assess EAL pupils’ development of underlying L2 linguistic competence, the Primary Schools Assessment Kit (Little, Lazenby Simpson, and Finnegan-Ćatibušić, 2007) was also developed. This kit comprises short tests, based on communicative activities expressed in the Benchmarks descriptors, through which teachers can assess EAL pupils’ development of L2 vocabulary, grammatical, phonological and orthographic competences.

While the Benchmarks were designed to guide EAL teaching, their approach to language learning, teaching and assessment reflects the CEFR’s promotion of plurilingualism as ‘a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p.4). Ensuring that children’s linguistic and cultural identities are recognised is a cornerstone of intercultural education. Practical ways of doing this are presented in resources associated with the Benchmarks, for example, *Together Towards Inclusion* –a ‘toolkit for diversity’ produced by IILT in collaboration with the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) in Northern Ireland in 2007. This toolkit, which was distributed to all primary schools in Ireland, outlines classroom and whole school approaches to EAL and emphasises the value of home languages. EAL pupils can also record their home language abilities in the Primary ELP. Although present economic conditions in Ireland have curtailed efforts in this area, some schools have developed highly successful initiatives which demonstrate the benefits of plurilingual education (see Kirwan, 2013).

#### **4. English L2 acquisition among EAL pupils**

##### **4.1 Empirical research**

Over the years, feedback from teachers has indicated that the Benchmarks and their associated resources are effective in supporting EAL learning, teaching and assessment. However, research was required to investigate the relation, if any, between the Benchmarks

and actual English L2 acquisition among EAL pupils. For this reason, a longitudinal study into English L2 development among EAL children within the context of their English language support lessons was conducted over the school year 2007–2008 in three Irish primary schools. Čatibušić and Little (2014) report the results of this research in depth; some of its main findings are briefly summarised in the sections below.

The study involved 18 EAL pupils, aged between four and ten years, from ten national backgrounds<sup>5</sup>. Eleven of these children were in their first year and seven were in their second year of English language support. To determine the appropriateness of the Benchmarks based on evidence obtained from EAL pupils' actual English L2 use, 154 English language support lessons were recorded and transcribed. Examples of the pupils' L2 written work were also collected.

This data was then analysed to discover whether and, if so, how the 18 EAL pupils' development of L2 oral and literacy skills related to the Benchmarks (see Čatibušić and Little 2014 for discussion of methodology). A form-function analysis was carried out on the pupils' English L2 use in activities that focused on the development of L2 oral skills. This mixed methods analysis examined the linguistic features of each pupil's turns-at-talk within these activities and the functional characteristics of these turns, as determined from their links to the Benchmarks descriptors<sup>6</sup>. In all, 7,455 spoken turns which linked to specific descriptors were analysed. Although most of the teachers involved in this study used the Benchmarks only as a loose guide in their lesson planning, the vast majority of the pupils' recorded turns related to existing descriptors. Any turns which did not were noted and, from these, suggestions were made regarding (generally minor) revisions to the Benchmarks (Čatibušić and Little, 2014, p.41). The pupils' L2 literacy development was then investigated through qualitative analysis of recorded activities which focused on L2 reading and writing and the examples of the children's written work.

Possible influences on the pupils' English L2 acquisition were also considered. These included individual factors such as age, home language, personality and learning style. As interaction patterns appeared to impact on pupils' L2 production, applied Conversation Analysis was used to 'supplement the form-function analysis by providing information about the interactional context of pupils' recorded turns' (Čatibušić and Little, 2014, p.43). Through

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<sup>5</sup> Children from Poland, Romania, Pakistan, Serbia, Croatia, China, India, Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal participated.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding linguistic features, the study focused on grammatical and lexical indicators of L2 development.



these multiple strands of analysis, it was possible to develop a ‘pupil profile’ for each of the 18 participants, indicating features of each child’s English L2 development over the study period. These ‘pupil profiles’ could then be cumulatively analysed to obtain overall results.

#### **4.2 Development of L2 oral skills**

Cumulative analysis of the 18 profiles showed that, over the two-year period of English language support, progression in the EAL pupils’ L2 oral proficiency reflected the trajectory described by the Benchmarks (see Čatibušić 2013, Čatibušić and Little 2014). At the beginning of pupils’ English language support allocation, all or most of their turns linked to level A1 Benchmarks descriptors. The proportion of A2-linked turns in pupils’ L2 oral production increased during their first year of English language support. B1-linked turns emerged during the pupils’ second year of support and these began to dominate towards the end of this two-year period. As pointed out above, most of the turns produced by pupils in activities which focused on L2 oral skills could be linked to Benchmarks descriptors; i.e. descriptors for spoken interaction and spoken production. Links to descriptors for listening were likewise evident in the listening-focused activities which featured in the recorded lessons.

Overall results were also obtained for indicators of English L2 grammatical and lexical development which emerged in the 18 EAL pupils’ recorded L2 use. Regarding the morphological indicators analysed, it was found that as the pupils’ English L2 proficiency progressed from level A1 to B1 their use of nouns, verbs, personal pronouns, articles, prepositions and auxiliaries increased. The accuracy of their production of these indicators also rose, albeit with considerable fluctuation. L2 syntactic development was similarly evident across proficiency levels A1 to B1. While pupils’ L2 production at level A1 was predominantly of noun-based structures, it became syntactically more complex as their turns began to be associated with levels A2 and B1. The range and accuracy of the negative structures and question forms they produced also increased, as did their ability to link clauses.

Pupils’ L2 lexical range also expanded with proficiency. As they progressed beyond A1 proficiency their semantic range became broader and deeper. Production of verb lexemes grew from a minimal base when the pupils’ turns linked to A1 descriptors to the use of a wide variety of more complex verbs at level B1. Likewise, lexical diversification of nouns and

adjectives was apparent and the range of lexico-grammatical indicators (e.g. adverbs) produced by the children increased substantially across levels A1 to B17.

### **4.3 Development of L2 literacy skills**

Pupils' writing and recorded literacy-related activities also linked to Benchmarks descriptors for reading and writing, thus indicating that these descriptors appropriately describe L2 literacy development<sup>8</sup>. It emerged that younger EAL pupils were capable of engaging with emergent literacy activities typical of the first two years of mainstream primary education in Ireland. However, older pupils faced the challenge of having to meet a rapidly 'moving target' (Cummins, 2012, p.67) to keep up with literacy demands of the primary school curriculum beyond the early years.

### **4.4 Possible influences on L2 acquisition**

Regarding individual influences on the pupils' L2 acquisition it appeared that the older children in this study (those aged between seven and ten years) progressed slightly faster in their English L2 proficiency development than the younger children (those under seven years). However, as mentioned above, meeting age-appropriate curriculum requirements proved more challenging for older EAL pupils than for those who were younger.

Cross-linguistic influence was apparent, particularly in relation to phonology and some aspects of grammatical development (Ćatibušić and Little, 2014, p.198). It also emerged that children with literacy skills in their home language made more progress in their development of L2 literacy than those who did not. This supports international research which stresses the value of biliteracy (see Cummins 2000, 2012).

Personality factors and learning style were observed to be further potential influences on pupils' L2 development. Some children who seemed more extraverted were good communicators but their L2 oral proficiency sometimes masked challenges they still faced, especially in relation to literacy. Two of the younger participants in this study appeared to be going through a 'silent period' of largely receptive L2 acquisition.

The analysis of classroom interaction revealed that responsive forms of discourse, typically 'known-answer' questions asked by the teacher, tended to dominate. However, when pupils

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of pupils' L2 grammatical and lexical development, see Ćatibušić and Little (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Pupils' L2 literacy development is discussed in depth by Ćatibušić and Little (2014).

engaged in more ‘active’ forms of discourse – such as taking initiatives in classroom talk or elaborating on topics of interest – their L2 oral use was often associated with the highest L2 proficiency level they had thus far attained. This suggests that pedagogical practice which encourages more active classroom discourse could be beneficial regarding L2 acquisition (cf. Swain 2000). Increased peer discourse rather than pupil-teacher interaction, which was predominant in the recorded lessons, could facilitate this kind of classroom talk by offering children a wider range of discourse roles.

## **5. Conclusion**

The results of this research demonstrate that child second language acquisition is a complex phenomenon which is subject to considerable individual variation. This study also shows that context-sensitive adaptations of the CEFR can appropriately map young learners’ L2 development. These findings have implications for pedagogical practice. They also indicate that the Benchmarks’ positively focused ‘can do’ approach to language learning, teaching and assessment could be relevant beyond the Irish context. Internationally, it could be applied to immigrant children learning any language of schooling or to children learning modern languages in the primary school. This could have many benefits for young learners. For example, assessment tools such as versions of the ELP could be used to support more effective and autonomous language learning.

Finally, the plurilingual and intercultural approach underpinning the Benchmarks is one that, as outlined above, recognises the linguistic and cultural identity of each child. This allows the language learning experience to become an affirmation of children’s unique identities and an opportunity for intercultural sharing from an early age. Encouraging plurilingualism in this way can thus be an important aspect of developing democratic citizenship, as advocated by the Council of Europe (2001, p.4). Training with regard to such approaches, through initial teacher education and continuing professional development, is therefore essential.

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