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Name: Emma Harvey

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Supervised by: Dr. Liam Mac Amhlaigh

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Student Number: 16251801

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Abstract

The purpose of my self-study action research project was to critically reflect upon my teaching of Irish in a DEIS band one school and to identify ways in which I could improve my teaching for the benefit of my students. I was motivated to examine my practice by the low levels of pupil interest in learning Irish in my class, as well as by their motivation and confidence with the language, and their reluctance to use the language orally. I wanted to develop strategies to encourage participation in Irish lessons. I also wanted to develop approaches that would foster interest in the language among my students.

The research was informed by the work of Vygotsky (1978) on the social nature of learning, Krashen's (1982) emphasis on comprehensible input, and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, alongside Dewey's (1938) advocacy for experiential learning. My research investigated the role of play based learning (Froebel, 1826), technology-based learning (Mishra and Koehler, 2006) and student voice (Dewey, 1938) in promoting meaningful language acquisition. Interventions included playful activities like using a Balla Focail and using ICT activities to develop interest in the language.

Findings revealed that play based learning and the incorporation of digital tools significantly enhanced students' willingness to speak the language, along with their motivation and confidence to do so. The study also highlighted the importance of teacher mindset, and the need to create a safe and comfortable learning environment in order for my students to remove the barriers they previously experienced to acquire their native tongue.

The research concludes with practical recommendations for teachers, especially those in DEIS settings, who want to revitalise Irish language teaching. It also reflects on the transformative impact of self-study action research on supporting teacher professional growth (Loughran, 2007)

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List of Acronyms

AR	Action Research
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
COS	Central Statistics Office
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EME	English Medium School
ERC	Educational Research Centre
EROC	Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre
HP Index	Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas
HSCL	Home School and Community Liaison Officer
IME	Irish Medium School
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
LASS	Language Acquisition Support System
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
PE	Physical Education
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PLT	Primary Language Toolkit

POD	Primary Online Database
PPOD	Post Primary Online Database
PT	Precision Teaching
SSAR	Self-Study Action Research
UNESCO	United Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organisation
WSE	Whole School Evaluation
WSE-MLL	Whole School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning

Chapter 1-Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The teaching of the Irish language presents many challenges in English Medium Schools (EMEs) in Ireland today. These challenges can be intensified in multigrade settings in socially and economically disadvantaged contexts. This Self-Study Action Research Project (SSAR) seeks to explore how the teaching of Irish can be enhanced in a multigrade mixed classroom in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) school in the east of Ireland. I aim to improve my teaching by using more engaging methodologies, with an emphasis on motivation, confidence and play.

Set within a multigrade mainstream DEIS band one classroom, this project arose from a personal and professional desire to enhance learner outcomes in Irish, particularly for students who have little or no exposure to the language outside of the classroom. It examines how more creative and learner focused strategies such as digital tools and games, can promote a more positive learner experience. The research is rooted in the belief that all children, irrespective of socio economic background, should have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the Irish language and develop a sense of ownership and enjoyment in their own learning.

As a class teacher in a multigrade classroom, I became increasingly aware of the difficulties faced by my students in learning Irish, especially for those for whom English or Irish is not the primary language in the home. This awareness prompted a critical reflection on my own teaching assumptions and approaches. Through a process of reflecting, planning, action and observation this study aims to identify strategies and approaches that can make Irish more accessible and enjoyable for the students in my classroom.

This chapter introduces the context of the research, outlines the rationale behind the study, presents the research questions and my values and outlines the roadmap of the project.

1.2 Context of the Study

The research took place in a multigrade mainstream classroom in an urban area in the east of the country. The school caters for a diverse student population, with a significant portion of the student body coming from socio economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The school has been awarded DEIS band one status. This programme aims to address educational disadvantages in socio economically disadvantaged areas through targeted supports and interventions (Department of Education, 2017). The band one status means the school caters for a school population in an area in which the level of educational disadvantage is deemed to be among the highest in the country.

The class involved in the research was a multigrade class across three different year groups. Multigrade teaching presents unique challenges and opportunities, particularly in language instruction. Effective language instruction in such settings requires differentiation, flexible grouping and curriculum integration (Little, 2006).

The diversity of learners in relation to ability, home language and engagement with the Irish language also posed a challenge. Many of the students had not engaged with the language at all during the COVID 19 pandemic. For some children Irish was a third or fourth language given their backgrounds and the fact that there was a language other than English spoken in the home.

The school in which the study was carried out is committed to providing positive learning experiences and to promoting inclusion among all learners. As a teacher researcher I was particularly interested in researching how innovative methodologies that promoted play and the use of digital tools could motivate the students to acquire Irish. The study took place over several weeks and three reflective cycles of interventions were used in order to enhance the learning experiences of the students in my classroom.

1.3 Rationale for the Research

Despite being a core subject in the Irish curriculum, the teaching and learning of Irish faces significant challenges in the Irish Education system, particularly in EMEs, especially in DEIS areas. Research has shown that students under such circumstances have very limited opportunities to experience Irish outside of the classroom setting, which affects their confidence, motivation and overall language acquisition (Harris et. al., 2006, Ó Duibhir, 2018). In multigrade settings, in which teachers manage mixed age groups, the complexity of language instruction is compounded by diverse learner needs and varying levels of proficiency (Little, 2006). This creates a need for innovative, inclusive and engaging approaches to teaching Irish.

The SSAR project was motivated by my own experience as an Irish teacher in a multigrade DEIS band one setting. I observed a major lack of interest and desire to learn Irish among my students. Traditional textbook driven lessons failed to capture their interest, with many students admitting to low confidence with using the language orally. I began to question my practice and how I could enhance it, in order to provide my students with more engaging and enjoyable experiences.

I felt that this would be a positive stepping stone in order for them to enjoy Irish lessons, leading to better language acquisition. The literature highlights the importance of learner motivation, teacher beliefs and creative pedagogy in fostering second language development (Dorneyi, 2001; Ellis, 2008; Gardner, 1985). These writers helped me to shape the direction of my inquiry for the benefit of my students.

There is also a wider policy imperative underpinning my research. The Primary Language Curriculum (2019) emphasises play based, communicative approaches to language learning and encourages teachers to nurture students' identity as language learners. However, many educators report a lack of confidence or training in order to teach Irish effectively, especially in disadvantaged contexts (Darmody & Daly, 2015). This

disconnect between curriculum vision and classroom reality identifies the need for teacher-led inquiry into what actually works in classrooms.

This research aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice by trialing methods that respond to the specific needs of the children and meet them at the point at which they are currently at, rather than imposing unattainable curriculum objectives upon them. Through three cycles of intervention, I aim to enhance the teaching and learning of the language not only within my classroom, but also to use my research as a motivator for other educators to do the same. The research also supports my growth as a reflective value driven practitioner, who is seeking to improve learner outcomes for all learners.

1.4 My Educational Values

This SSAR project was underpinned by my core values of honesty, fairness and respect. These values shaped both my research methodology and my classroom practice and guided my decisions as I sought to improve my teaching of Irish.

1.4.1 Honesty

Honesty was central to how I approached the research process. I was transparent with students, parents and colleagues about the study's aims and scope. I strived to present findings truthfully and accurately, while also acknowledging areas for professional growth and development. McNiff (2017) argues that AR is value driven and calls on research practitioners to engage with integrity and openness throughout the research.

1.4.2 Fairness

Fairness informed my research design. In a multigrade DEIS context, children bring diverse learning needs, competencies and life experiences into the classroom. It was important that the strategies I used were appropriate and met the children at their level, rather than applying curriculum outcomes that were currently unachievable. As Glenn et.

al. (2023) note, fairness and equity are essential guiding principles in ethically conducted practitioner research, particularly in settings marked as areas of socio economic disadvantage.

1.4.3 Respect

Respect guided my interactions with pupils and colleagues. I believe that every student has the right to be heard and to feel valued and listened to in the school community. This respect extended to how I collected data, particularly when I sought student feedback. In keeping with Freire's (1970) idea of dialogic education, I saw the students as active participants in their own learning, not as passive recipients of knowledge.

1.5 My Indicators of Success

I purposely kept my indicators of success very simple in order to ascertain if I was making progress. They were as follows:

Can I find examples of the children enjoying Irish?
Can I find an improvement of their language acquisition of the Irish language?

1.6 Potential Contribution of the Study

This AR project aimed to bridge the gap between the curriculum expectations in Irish-language teaching and the realities in a multigrade DEIS band one classroom. It offers hope to fellow teachers who feel unsure about improving their teaching of Irish, particularly in disadvantaged areas in which the children don't experience the language outside of the school.

On a national level I wanted to open a discussion on greater Continuous Professional Development Courses (CPD) for teachers who lack confidence with teaching Irish, especially in disadvantaged areas. It also contributes to national conversations around

teacher empowerment, curriculum implementation and teacher agency. Finally, it also promotes reflective practice by teachers, who are the professionals in the classroom, working daily to overcome these challenges.

1.7 Chapter Overview

This thesis is presented in five chapters, each one building upon the previous to explore my reflective journey to enhance my teaching of Irish in a multigrade DEIS band one setting.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter outlines the background, aims, context and rationale of the study. It also sets out my values and the potential contribution of the study at local and national level.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter examines relevant theories and studies on language acquisition, the status of Irish in education, DEIS contexts, digital learning and methodologies for teaching Irish.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter details the research design, including the self-study and AR approach, examines the research paradigms, data collection methods, ethical considerations and validation methods. It highlights the Interpretive Paradigm which guided this qualitative research.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the main findings of the AR project and presents the themes that emerged from the research using the Braun and Clarke method (2021). It also includes reflections on my professional growth, as well as linking findings to literature.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter summarises the key outcomes, discusses their implications for classroom practice and teacher professional development, and outlines recommendations for future research. It concludes with my final reflections on my learning journey as a teacher researcher.

Chapter 2-Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review will be divided into three sections. Firstly, it will consider some of the key theorists in language teaching and learning and how these theories are intertwined with language acquisition. It will then examine the Irish language in Ireland, its position as a compulsory subject in the Irish Education system and some of the barriers to teaching it in an EME. The new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) will be considered as well as the type of school referred to as a 'DEIS' school in Ireland. Finally, studies carried out by others and the methodologies used to improve Irish language acquisition both in the classroom and beyond it will be considered.

2.2 Key theorists in language learning

Language learning has been a topic of discussion for key theorists for a long time. As early as 380 BC Plato (Cratylus) questioned the nature of language and communication. In the twentieth century both Freire and Chomsky spoke extensively about language learning.

In order to examine language learning we must also consider language acquisition. Language acquisition is, 'the implicit process of building a linguistic system by making form-meaning connections from the input' (Henshaw, 2022). In essence it is how we learn language, and it usually occurs through immersion in the language. Krashen (1978) was the first person to separate the two terms in his acquisition/learning hypothesis. This will be discussed in detail in section 2.2.1.

In essence, effective language teaching and learning results in effective language acquisition. How individuals acquire language has been the source of a lot of debate and counter debate over the years.

Freire (1970) criticised 'the banking concept' of education, in which the teacher imparted the information and the students just listened. Although his ideas were primarily

concerned with primary language learning, they can also be applied to second language learning. He wanted dialogue to be used in language teaching and learning and suggested the material and topics discussed must be relevant to the learner. He wanted to empower learners through communication and mutual respect.

Chomsky (1957) introduced the concept of 'universal grammar', the idea that human beings are born with an innate ability to acquire language. This view had far reaching implications not only for linguistics but also for psychology. In contrast, Skinner (1957) proposed that language develops through operant conditioning, with reinforcement shaping linguistic behaviour. Chomsky (1959) famously refuted this, arguing that children are not blank slates but possess innate structures to facilitate language learning.

Some theorists highlighted the cognitive and social dimensions of language teaching and learning. Piaget (1952) saw cognitive development as central to language acquisition, whereas Vygotsky (1978) emphasised sociocultural context. He introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development to explain how learners progress under guidance from a knowledgeable other. Building on this Bruner (1960) proposed the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), which emphasises the roles of modelling, feedback and interaction. Similarly, Bandura (1986) spoke about the importance of modelling in language acquisition.

Krashen (1981) was instrumental in the creation of theory specific to second language acquisition (SLA). He developed the Monitor Theory which focuses on the way in which a person acquires his/her second language. He argues that it happens in the same way as a person acquires his/her mother tongue. To explain his theory Krashen developed five major hypotheses which I will discuss in turn.



Stephen Krashen, 2021

2.2.1 Acquisition/ Learning Hypothesis

Krashen was the first person to separate the ideas of language acquisition and language learning. Up until his work the terms were used almost interchangeably. He defined 'language acquisition' as subconscious learning consisting of implicit learning, informal learning and natural learning. (Krashen, 1981). The emphasis in this type of learning is on communication, rather than correct grammar. According to Krashen language learning was a conscious form of learning, in which the recipient is provided with a new language through a formal way of instruction or through guided instruction, rather than spontaneously (Padmanbha et. al., 2023). Some critics disregarded this separation and claimed they could not be successfully independent of one another. For example, Chomsky (1984) did not feel the two concepts could be separated and argued that they were interconnected.

2.2.2 Input Hypothesis

Krashen argued that comprehensible input, which was slightly above the learner's present level, was necessary to acquire language. This argument is similar to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Krashen stated that teaching is the crucial role of comprehension and also that the value of the input determines the level of success. (Padmanbha et. al., 2023) This is similar to the beliefs of Freire who felt if the learner found the input of relevance to them he/she would learn it more easily (Freire, 1970)

2.2.3 Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen referred to another variable in determining success in language acquisition, namely the Affective Filter. The Affective Filter is a mental block which restricts the target language acquirers from receiving the comprehensible target language input, in which the affective factors disturb their real language acquisition process (Padmanbha et. al., 2023) Factors such as motivation, self confidence and anxiety play a role here but these will be discussed in greater detail at a later stage. White (1987) criticised the simplicity of this affective filter hypothesis and questioned the lack of empirical evidence to support it. Schmidt (1990) argued that the Affective Filter Hypothesis lacked clarity.

2.2.4 Monitor Hypothesis

The Monitor Hypothesis is the system by which the learner applies learned rules to their communication in order to produce the language. It is in essence when the learner self corrects mistakes by following learned rules. If used too often it can hinder the fluency with which the learner communicates. Krashen (1981) divides the monitor into three categories based on how much monitoring they engage in-high monitor, intermediate monitor and low monitor. High monitors self correct too often, while low monitors self correct too infrequently. This hypothesis was again criticised by both Schmidt (1990) and White (1987) as being too vague. Neither felt that monitoring could be adequately quantified.

2.2.5 Natural Order Hypothesis

This theory by Krashen suggests that people acquire grammatical structures in a particular order. Some structures are learned a lot quicker than others. He suggests that language learning should reflect this order, and this theory is very closely linked with the input theory hypothesis. Critics, however, felt that this order was not as set in stone as Krashen believed. It was also felt that it was too difficult to quantify this hypothesis.

2.2.6 Critics of Krashen

There was extensive criticism of the work of Krashen. A lot of it centred around the fact that some of his hypotheses were not considered to be quantifiable or testable. (White 1987, Schmidt 1990, Swan 1995, Chomsky 1991). Another shortcoming of his research according to his critics was what the term ‘comprehensible input’ actually applied to in the Input Hypothesis. However, I think it is fair to say that a lot of his research is relevant to language learning. Indeed, Van Patten (2012) stated that even though comprehensible input has been criticised as a term, it is still widely used in the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling Community. Van Patten (2021) believes that the ideas expressed by Krashen over forty years ago are still relevant today and I concur. His hypotheses will guide me in constructing the methodologies for my SSAR project.

There have been a number of different studies carried out by different researchers over the past number of years in an effort to try and improve language acquisition in the language of Irish both in Irish schools and outside of the education system. Audiolingualism, communicative language teaching and content, and language integrated learning were some of the methods examined by Flynn (2020). He was positive in regard to immersion being a great tool for language acquisition, as well as the use of peer interactions.

2.3 The Language of Irish

Article Eight of the Irish Constitution states that, ‘Irish, as the national language, is the first official language of the country’ (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Art. 8.1). The English language is recognised as a second official language. (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Art. 8.2) However despite this, English is the dominant spoken and written language in the country.

The 2022 census recorded that just over five million people lived in Ireland. In this census the number of people who indicated that they could speak Irish increased by 6% between

2016 and 2022 to 1,873,997. This figure represents just under two fifths of the Irish population. While it is an improvement on previous levels, it demonstrates succinctly that Irish is very much a minority language in the country. Of the people who say they could speak Irish, 623,961 spoke it daily within and outside the education system. 71,968 of the daily speakers used Irish outside the education system. These figures indicate the unique position of Irish as a national language, but also as an endangered one (UNESCO, 2019). They also demonstrate an over reliance on the education system as the primary place of using the Irish language.

Irish is a core subject in the Irish curriculum, along with Mathematics and English. Its importance cannot be overlooked, especially when one considers that it can have impacts on further study in later life. Higher level Irish language proficiency is essential to gain access to some high status professions in Ireland. Students in DEIS schools are less likely to study higher level Irish for the Leaving Certificate (terminal exam in Ireland) than students in non DEIS schools, which in turn can have significant effects on the social mobility of DEIS students (O Sullivan, 2019). If teaching, as an example, is considered under current rules a person cannot become a primary school teacher without achieving a higher level Irish score in the Leaving Certificate. This can be a barrier to a diversity of educators in the system which raises concerns. Surely it could only be beneficial for students of Irish in DEIS areas to learn for people who have been through similar education paths themselves.

There are two different types of schools in which the subject is taught-Irish Medium Schools (IME) and English Medium Schools (EME). As noted by the Inspectorate (2020) there are many obstacles pertaining to the teaching of Irish in EMEs. The aforementioned report was carried out by the Chief Inspectorate during the years 2016 to 2020. The purpose of the report was to provide an analysis of, and reflection on, the quality of education provision in schools and other education settings in Ireland during this period. The report considers the findings from inspection, advisory and research work carried out by Department of Education inspectors in a range of education contexts, including primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools, the early childhood care and education

(ECCE) programme, centres for education and other types of education provision. (Chief Inspectorate Report, 2020) As I work in an EME school I will focus my research on schools of this nature.

2.4 Obstacles to teaching Irish in an EME

2.4.1 Teacher's Competency in the Language

In order to teach a language effectively, teachers need to be both proficient users of the target language and have an explicit understanding of its linguistic structures. (Ní Dhiorbhán, 2021). The 2020 Inspectorate report found that 3% of the teachers surveyed 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. (Chief Inspectorate, 2016-2022).

It suggests that a lack of proficiency is a barrier to successful teaching of language and this is evident in some Irish schools. There was a correlation between the teachers' ability to speak the language and their ability to teach it. Those who spoke it badly were not usually likely to receive satisfactory or very satisfactory in their ability to teach the language. Conversely 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 (Chief Inspectorate, 2016-2022).

2.4.2 Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The report recommended that teacher-education providers need to review and improve the initial courses in Irish provided to student teachers. It also suggested that CPD courses needed to be made available to teachers in the language throughout their career. In particular, a mentoring programme for Irish language teaching should be used for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and for those not yet qualified in the language.

Another recommendation was for schools to try and organise CPD in Irish at local level for their teachers. These methods, if implemented, would play a significant role in raising the standard of Irish language teaching in schools. By strengthening both initial training and ongoing professional learning, teachers would be better equipped to deliver, engaging, motivating and confidence building language instruction to their pupils.

2.4.3 Lesson Learning Outcomes

During the 2016 to 2020 period, inspectors found that pupils' attainment of learning objectives was good or very good in just 67% of Irish lessons evaluated during Whole School Evaluations (WSE), Whole School Evaluations-Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) and Curriculum Evaluations in EMEs. These evaluations are inspections carried out by the Department of Education in order to assess the quality of teaching and learning in Irish schools.

The quality of learning outcomes was noted to be good or very good in just 72% of lessons observed during unannounced inspections. Overall, across a range of inspection models, inspectors found that there was scope to improve the quality of pupils' learning in 33% (announced inspections) and 28% (unannounced inspections) of lessons observed.

During their engagements with inspectors in 2020, schools highlighted that children's learning in Irish had suffered disproportionately as a result of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it was noted that there was insufficient opportunity for children to communicate through Irish and to develop their language skills in meaningful communicative contexts. (Chief Inspectorate report, 2022).

This evidence suggests that teachers planning in Irish needed improvement and that it also needed to recognise the impact of the pandemic and to adjust planning accordingly to bridge the gaps in knowledge arising from the lack of effective learning in the language during this time. In my own context little engagement with online learning was reported

across all subjects, but particularly with Irish. This suggests that my students suffered greatly from the lack of opportunity to use or hear Irish during the pandemic.

2.4.4 Student Engagement and Motivation

Motivation is used as a concept for explaining the success or failure of a language learner. (Nurhidayah, 2020). Student motivation plays a central role in language learning success. However, many studies have shown that students in EMEs, especially in disadvantaged areas, often lack strong motivation to learn Irish (Harris, 2006; O' Sullivan, 2019).

One of the key issues identified is that many students see Irish as irrelevant to their lives outside of the classroom. This limited exposure and lack of engagement with the language can lead to low levels of both achievement and enthusiasm.

It is important to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors. The intrinsic factors come from within the person. They can be associated with success in the language. There is a general consensus that the concept of attitude and motivation in language learning is complex but strongly correlated with successful language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001). However in socio disadvantaged areas in particular Irish is not seen as a 'living language' but as a school subject to pass. This leads to low intrinsic motivation among students.

Another determining factor can be the language medium of the school. Murtagh (2007) found that students are much more motivated to learn Irish in an IME. In contrast, in an EME students are at best neutral and at worst negative to learning Irish. (Devitt, 2015).

Extrinsic motivating factors come from outside of the person in the environment in which they learn. The teacher can play a role in motivating the student. The role of the teacher in generating a low stress, highly motivating learning context has been identified as central to facilitating language learning and encouraging learner autonomy (Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998). This third point resonates hugely with me and in keeping with my value of honesty,

I need to consider whether I am generating a ‘highly motivating learning context’ in relation to the teaching of Irish in my classroom.

Gardner’s Socio Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition (1985) provides a useful framework for understanding this issue. Gardner argues that motivation is composed of three elements: attitudes towards the learning environments, integrativeness and motivation. When students do not see Irish as relevant or see a connection with Irish speaking communities, integrative motivation suffers, as does their overall motivation to learn the language.

O’ Sullivan (2019) noted that the promotion of the Irish language has not been successful in areas experiencing socio economic disadvantage. Factors such as negative parental attitudes, low teacher confidence and an over emphasis on literacy and numeracy at the expense of creative subjects all contribute to students’ disengagement.

Improving students' motivation requires that learners experience success, enjoyment and real life applications of the language. Approaches that foster intrinsic motivation, such as the use of digital tools, creative methodologies and student choice are more likely to result in positive long-term outcomes for Irish- language acquisition.

2.5 Assessment

The Chief Inspectorate Report (2020) set out clearly that assessment in relation to Irish in schools was not of the requisite standard. Although it was mentioned in some of the school plans that were examined and in some of the individual teaching plans in reality it was haphazard.

The report suggested a cohesive approach in assessment for Irish in schools and also queried whether standardised testing, similar to the sort used in Mathematics and English would be necessary.

I am conflicted in this regard. The standardised testing approach to me promotes what Freire (1970) called, ‘The Banking Concept’ of education and I would be reluctant to use it in Irish as it would be in contravention to my value of fairness. It would be contrary to adopting a communicative and sociocultural approach in the classroom. In essence I feel it could be in contradiction to what I am trying to achieve. However, I do feel that a more uniform method of assessment in Irish is necessary. Perhaps alternative assessment tools like portfolios or oral language checklists could be a good starting point in order to develop a more cohesive assessment of Irish-language acquisition in Irish schools.

2.6 Primary Language Curriculum (PLC)

The PLC was introduced into schools in Ireland on a phased basis in 2015. Despite being delayed by the pandemic it is now widely used in all primary schools to plan and teach both Irish and English. It was introduced to address some of the shortcomings voiced by teachers and other stakeholders to the 1999 curriculum, while also building on some of its key aspects. It was also felt that the time for an update of the curriculum was necessary.

It is an integrated curriculum that is spiral in nature, and it reflects the fact that Irish schools now have a diverse range of learners. Some students have English as a first language, some have Irish, but a lot of others now have different languages and these are often the languages that are spoken in the family home. In essence more students than ever before are arriving at Irish schools either as bilingual learners and/or learners who have never experienced the English or Irish language before. ‘The introduction of the PLC offers the opportunity to respond to the emergent needs of learners and teachers in dynamic and creative ways. In designing innovative approaches to teaching Irish, it is important to focus on the skills and dispositions we want to inculcate in learners and to target weaknesses that have been identified in the teaching of Irish’ (Learning and teaching Irish in English Medium Schools Research paper, 2020).

This curriculum has the same strands, elements and learning objectives for both Irish and English. According to the PLC, ‘Developing skills in one language will help children to

develop similar skills in another language, provided they have adequate exposure to the language, and adequate motivation and opportunities to engage with the language. An explicit focus on integration between languages enables children to make cross-lingual connections and develop an awareness of how language works' (PLC, 2015). The content of the PLC is also assisted by the introduction of the Primary Language Toolkit (PLT) which supports the learning outcomes by giving examples of children's language learning, progression continua and support materials for teachers. These provide invaluable help on implementing the new curriculum.

One particular point explicitly mentioned in the PLC is, "Opportunities for 'partial Irish-language immersion' for all children can be created through the teaching of curriculum areas or aspects of curriculum areas in Irish". This is something which can be considered in my methodology stage of my research as a way of incorporating opportunities for the class to use Irish and to enjoy it.

The positive impacts of total immersion in the Irish language in Irish schools has been very successful. 5% of schools in Ireland are Irish immersion schools. They have continued success in teaching the language to students. Children in the Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools were found to acquire higher levels of Irish decoding skill, Irish vocabulary and knowledge of Irish orthographic patterns than age-matched children attending an English-medium school (Parsons, 2009 p. 4) It could be argued as a result that partial immersion in an EME could yield similar results, or at least better results than a complete lack of immersion. Krashen (1984) described immersion as probably 'the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language-teaching literature'.

There is also 'partial immersion' in Ireland with children attending the 'Gaeltacht' for summer courses to improve their language acquisition. These have also enjoyed success. De Spáinn (2006) suggests that immersion is the key point to language acquisition and while he promotes total immersion, he also sees the benefits of partial immersion. This type of immersion can be useful in English medium schools in order to improve the language acquisition of the pupils in the language of Irish.

2.7 DEIS Schools

The DEIS programme was first introduced into Irish schools in 2005 as a method of combating or reducing educational disadvantage. Such schools were first identified based on the filling in of a survey by the school's principal. Following a review of the DEIS programme, which resulted in the publication of the Report on the Review of DEIS and DEIS Plan 2017, and drawing on the feedback from stakeholders, an objective approach to the identification of schools for inclusion in DEIS was developed.

The key data sources used in the DEIS identification process were data from the Department of Education's (the Department) Primary Online Database (POD) and Post Primary Online Database (PPOD), and Central Statistics Office (CSO) data from the National Census of Population as represented in the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (HP index). The HP index provides a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a small geographical area using data compiled from the National Census (DEIS report, 2017)

To understand what a DEIS school is and why we have such schools in Ireland, it must be defined what educational disadvantage is. Educational Disadvantage refers to the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools. Contexts that can give rise to this risk include socio-economic disadvantage, being a Traveller or a member of the Roma communities, or accommodation arrangements, including homelessness or residing in an International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) setting or Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre (EROC) (DEIS report, 2017). DEIS schools were set up to try and bridge the gap between poor educational attainment and living in a disadvantaged area.

Extra resources, smaller class sizes and initiatives like the provision for a Home School and Community Liaison (HSCL) role are some of the methods used to help the students in these schools to achieve their full academic potential.

At primary level, DEIS schools are allocated to one of three bands: Urban Band 1 (urban schools with the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage); Urban Band 2 (urban schools with high levels of concentrated disadvantage); or DEIS Rural (rural schools experiencing high levels of concentrated disadvantage). (Educational Research Centre (ERC), 2023). As stated above there are situations currently in Ireland where either Irish or English are not the mother tongue of the child in education, and often another language is spoken in the home.

The 2022 Census found more than 750,000 people spoke a language other than English or Irish at home, with the most commonly spoken languages being Polish, Romanian, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The (ERC) carried out a report in 2024 (Nelis, 2024) on principals' initial perspectives of action planning in new DEIS schools. At primary level the report found that the proportions of students who spoke a language other than English or Irish at home were higher in Band 1 and Band 2 schools than in DEIS Rural schools.

In 2022 the Central Statistics Office (CSO) found that languages other than English or Irish were the main language in 3.5% of Irish homes. This has a direct impact on the teaching of Irish in our schools as some students have never heard of the language before coming to school and have no opportunity whatsoever to hear it outside of school. As described by (O' Toole, 2023) these children have no opportunity to experience Irish as a 'living language'. They also have the added pressure, in some cases, of learning another language outside of the school setting. The school in which I will carry out my research is a DEIS band one school, which demonstrates that the above challenges are very relevant to my educational setting.

While research shows that attitudes and motivations towards Irish-language learning have improved among some demographic and socio-cultural groups, the promotion of Irish-

language learning has not been successful in areas experiencing social and economic disadvantage (O Sullivan, 2019). In general lower levels of success are experienced by learners in DEIS schools. There are many theories as to why this is so. The over emphasis on literacy and numeracy is one such theory. While promoting literacy and numeracy is an important aim of Irish educational policy, there is increasing concern that it is having an adverse effect on teachers' ability to preserve the breath and richness of the primary curriculum. (Burns, 2015) Attitudes to the language of both students and parents and motivation to learn it is another theory. (Harris, 2006) Some parents feel their children would be better off learning a 'living' European language rather than Irish. Teacher shortage can also be an issue. These shortages are felt most acutely in DEIS areas. (O' Sullivan, 2019) She recommended that, 'It is imperative that an increased emphasis is placed on improving the engagement of students in DEIS schools with the Irish language, as this has a direct impact on the number of students studying Irish at higher level'. (O Sullivan, 2019)

2.8 Digital Learning

There can be no doubt that digital learning has a huge role to play in the future of Irish education. Its uses were widely evident during the covid pandemic which expedited the rate at which both pupils and teachers used it for teaching and learning. The Digital Strategies for Schools Plan 2027 has been introduced by the government in order to, 'Empower schools to harness the opportunities of digital transformation to build digital competence and an effective digital education ecosystem so as to develop competent, critically engaged, active learners while supporting them to reach their potential and participate fully as global citizens in a digital world' (Digital Strategies for Schools, p.11) This plan also sets out digital learning as an integrated and essential component of children's learning experience across the primary curriculum. (O' Toole, 2024) While it doesn't explicitly refer to digital learning in the teaching and learning of the Irish language, it can be deduced that digital learning is an opportunity to increase student's motivation and engagement with the language.

In today's society the majority of primary school children spend time online or engaging with digital material. A survey by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in 2021 found that between 70 and 80 percent of Irish children go online daily. If digital learning was amalgamated with Irish-language learning in the classroom it could lead to increased motivation and interest to learn the language. This exact point was identified by the inspectorate when they iterated that teachers should “make greater use of digital technology to support relevant and meaningful learning experiences in the teaching and learning of Irish” (Inspectorate, 2022, p.114).

Technology-mediated language learning can provide learners with much-needed opportunities to consolidate Irish-language learning as well as engage with the language across a range of authentic contexts and develop language learner networks (O' Toole, 2023). There have been efforts in Ireland to increase Irish-language learning and experiencing opportunities in areas outside the classroom. Indeed the highly ambitious 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030 (Irish: Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010–2030) aims to encourage daily use of the language outside of the classroom.

Using digital technology as a methodology for teaching the language in the classroom could be a stepping stone to promote this. If children used digital technology outside the classroom to access the language or to play games through it or to watch a video of it, this action could be determined as a success in strengthening the parameters in which the language is used.

O' Toole (2022) carried out a participatory research school based study in which pupils in a fourth class engaged in a three stage study. The three stages were peer tutoring in the classroom, student-parent tutoring and technology mediated language learning. She incorporated socio cultural theory in her research and her findings were very positive. She noted that the students' motivation and level of engagement increased massively when they became active participants in their own learning. The participants also spoke about the increase of opportunity to speak Irish outside of the classroom.

This study was a great way of helping to achieve this exact aim as set out in The Irish Language 20-Year Strategy for the Promotion of Irish (2010-2030). It also demonstrates that students become more engaged and motivated to learn Irish when the learning moves away from the traditional use of the textbook and instead utilises a more unique and fun driven methodology. The teacher needs to move away from the ‘chalk and talk’ methodology that is old fashioned at this stage. Students need to have more diverse learning opportunities. These experiences help to maintain their interest and develop positive attitudes towards the Irish language.

2.9 Irish-Language Teaching

Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir (2017); Ó Duibhir et al (2016) carried out a series of studies which explored the effectiveness of an explicit-inductive approach to grammar teaching in improving the linguistic accuracy of Grade 5 and 6 students in 12 Irish immersion classes. The students in this sort of approach are invited to form their own grammar rules, guided by the teacher. A pretest, post test and delayed post test took place to determine success. It was found that the approach led to increased awareness of grammar rules and it also demonstrated a significant increase in achievement overall from pre to post test. In essence when the students were handed autonomy over their own learning it led to success.

Moriarty (2017) carried out a unique and interesting study involving the use of translanguaging and rap. Translanguaging in this context means, ‘learners making use of available language resources without full or perfect bilingual competence in the language learning context’ (Batardiere, 2022). These learners were asked to develop a rap song using predominantly the language of Irish. The students in the study reported that they found the assignment ‘fun’ and no longer saw Irish as a boring language. It was a chance to step away from the textbook which doesn’t always apply to the living situations of the students. This study was also carried out in a school in a disadvantaged area and the use of the medium of rap engaged and motivated the students. Moriarty (2017) summed it up nicely in his conclusion when he said, ‘There is a need to overcome the monolingual mind-

set that has underpinned much of the existing approaches to minority language education'. This study encapsulates the essence of what my research is trying to achieve.

Ní Chróinín et al. (2016) explored the teachers' and children's experiences of a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to the teaching of Physical Education Curriculum content and Irish in English-medium primary schools. CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content *and* language (Mac Gearailt, 2021). (CLIL) has been defined as an educational approach where content is taught through the medium of a second language (O' Sullivan, 2019). The focus is on the learning of content rather than on the language. The CLIL approach is endorsed as a methodology in the PLC (NCCA, 2019). CLIL offers authentic integration opportunities across the curriculum and increases children's exposure to the target language by extending its use as a medium of communication and instruction in authentic contexts beyond discrete language lessons. (PLC Support Materials 2019)

In the study mentioned above, data was gathered from eight educators and over two hundred student participants. The study taught Physical Education (PE) lessons through the language medium of Irish. This study had a mixed level of success. While the lessons were enjoyed by students it was stated that the integration method was not entirely successful. It was felt that the emphasis on language detracted from the teaching of PE. However, the study did provide an authentic learning environment and fostered a more positive attitude to the language. It also allowed opportunities to learn game specific vocabulary and informal vocabulary (Batardiere, 2022). This study was in keeping with the Froebelian principles of play as central to learning, holistic development and hands on learning so it cannot be ruled out completely as a failure, but rather as a lesson in which PE is not at the forefront of the lesson. PE, in this scenario can be viewed as a methodology to promote hands-on learning and language acquisition in a fun and creative way.

2.10 Conclusion

Ultimately what the literature demonstrates is that an emphasis on creative and engaging lessons yields positive outcomes. In designing innovative approaches to teaching Irish, it is important to focus on the skills and dispositions we want to inculcate in learners and to target weaknesses that have been identified in the teaching of Irish. (Dunne, 2020) The teacher needs to create an enjoyable and motivating working environment for the students in which they have many opportunities to experience success in their learning. Various methodologies such as CLIL and PT can help in the creation of this environment. Digital technology is instrumental to teaching in the modern day classroom.

2.11 Overall conclusion

The literature tells us that there have been many theories on language acquisition but ultimately when the learner is engaged in an input rich lesson, in which there are opportunities to speak and practice the language success will ensue. There needs to be a communicative approach and the scope for integrated language learning in the Irish school system has been enhanced with the introduction of the PLC. Learning Irish in a multigrade DEIS school presents different challenges to the learner and the educator than in other schools, but this cannot be solely relied upon as a barrier to success. It is the task of the educator to proactively respond to these challenges through thoughtful pedagogy and reflective practice. Finally, different methodologies and a varied approach will help to foster an interest in succeeding and a motivation to learn in the language.

Chapter 3-Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this educational SSAR project was to enhance my own practice in relation to improving my students' capacity to acquire the language of Irish in a multigrade DEIS classroom. The primary aim was to ensure that my teaching of the language changed so that my students enjoyed learning the language and had an interest in engaging with it. The self-study action research project developed a 'living theory' (Whitehead, 1989) that improved my own teaching of the language and the educational experiences of my students with it.

3.2 Research Rationale

The rationale for my research emerged from some tough critical reflection on my teaching of Irish. I began to notice that my lessons were not engaging my students and their attitude to Irish was generally negative. They seemed to equate success in Irish with being able to understand every word, and this became a barrier to their motivation and confidence to use the language.

Through tough self reflection I recognised that my teaching approach had to change if I was to foster a more positive and inclusive learning environment. I wanted to find strategies that would not only enhance the language acquisition of my students but also make Irish lessons enjoyable for them. The research project was therefore designed to make Irish more accessible and engaging for all learners in a multigrade, mainstream DEIS band one classroom.

3.3 Research Design and Paradigms

Kuhn (1962) stated that the approaches methodology in research have been informed by the idea of paradigms. A research paradigm is a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and of the functions of researchers which, adhered to by a group of

researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions (Bassey, 1999). There are three main paradigms of educational research as set out by Bassey. They are the positivist research paradigm, the interpretive research paradigm and the action research paradigm.

3.3.1 Positivist Paradigm

The positivist paradigm is a scientifically based objective research methodology in which the emphasis is on statistical and numerical data. The positivist paradigm mostly involves quantitative methodology, utilizing experimental methods involving experimental (or treatment) and control groups and administration of pre- and post-tests to measure gain scores (Taylor, 2013). Quantitative methods examine the effects of specified circumstances (independent variable) on an outcome of interest (dependent variable) in ways that can be expressed numerically. (Lakshman, 2000). A positivist methodology does not increase our autonomy because our personal teacher craft and expertise are filtered out in favour of the ideal of objectivity within a positivist paradigm. (McDonagh et. al 2019).

A positivist approach can contribute to the knowledge base of the teaching profession when knowledge is understood only as statistically verifiable facts, objective realities and absolute truths and where experiments and conclusions can be replicated. (Mc Donagh et. al 2019). While it can be a very useful paradigm in analysing the theories of natural sciences, I agree with the researchers (Cohen et. al 2018; Bassey 1989) that it lacks a holistic element when applied to the social sciences, especially with regard to the classroom and education. Therefore, this paradigm was not suited to my research.

3.3.2 Interpretative Paradigm

The interpretative paradigm was developed as a result of unhappiness with the limitations of the positivist paradigm. Cohen et al. (2018) and Denzin and Lincoln (2017) call it a post-positivist paradigm to address the criticisms of the positivist research paradigm. This

methodology has a more subjectivist view of knowledge. However, this form of research does not allow the researcher to see themselves as active participants in the research. The aim is also not to use findings to improve their practice (Bassey, 1990). Educational interpretive research often involves a researcher from outside the research context identifying a knowledge gap or practice-based gap, using observations, interviews, questionnaires, surveys and statistics to evaluate (or interpret) a situation. When this happens, the authentic voice of the practitioner -the researched- can sometimes either be silenced or filtered through the interpretation of the spectator-researcher. (McDonagh, 2019) This conflicts with my rationale for undertaking the research, therefore it is not a suitable research paradigm for me.

3.3.3 Action Research Paradigm

I chose the action research paradigm as it aligned with my values and focuses on improving my teaching. It also allowed for greater scope to not only examine my practice, but to improve it. Action research is about researchers trying to improve the phenomena of their surroundings, whereas the other two paradigms both involve the idea of observers trying to describe the phenomena of their surroundings (Bassey, 1999). I was attracted to the idea of trying to improve my practice for the benefit of my students.

Figure 3.1-Comparison of Research Paradigms

Comparison of Educational Research Paradigms

Positivist	Interpretative	Action Research
Quantitative	Qualitative	Qualitative
Objective	Subjective	Values-led
Detached observer	Interviews	Practitioner-researcher
Statistical data	Surveys	Reflective cycles
Control groups	Knowledge gap focus	Practice improvement
Pre/Post tests		Collaboration

3.4 Action Research (AR)

Lewin (1946) defined Action Research as, ‘Comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action’. Kemmis (2022) defined it more recently as a way of working which helps people to develop, ‘Their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they live and work-to transform the work, the worker and the workplace’. Action research brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1). Carr and Kemmis (1986) said that this form of research involves taking action (action) in order to find out what is not known (research) and in so doing, to cause improvements. The reasoning behind this research approach is that the individual researchers are seeking to live to their core values in their work and teaching. (McDonagh, 2019).

Lewin (1948) presented an approach to action research with cycles of analysis, fact-finding, conceptualisation, planning, implementation and evaluation of actions. (McDonagh, 2019) Bassey (1990) states that each cycle informs the next cycle as an iterative process. However sometimes the cyclical nature of AR is not straightforward (McEniff & Whitehead 2010). Mellor (2001) offers that the cyclical process can be a series of ‘messy’ approaches which can provide challenges for the teacher researcher.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of AR. In educational AR the students are seen as co researchers in the research and qualitative data is generally used to give the students a voice in the research. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) found that many educational practices and settings greatly underestimate the social maturity of children and young people. There is a great loss of potential, they suggest, because the gains from including student voice in meaningful decision making can have a significant positive impact on students' academic, social and personal development. (Mc Donagh, 2019)

The seeking of the opinions of colleagues and the use of critical friends and validation groups also offer opportunities for collaboration. It also affords greater opportunities for the triangulation of the data in order to make it more reliable.

Reflection is also paramount in AR. In Sullivan et al. (2016) they suggest that reflection on one's work is a core part for improving one's learning about teaching. The researcher is encouraged to engage in critical reflection on his or her practice and to meaningfully articulate thoughts about it. There are many models for reflection. I experimented with the following models in my reflective journal-Kolb (1984), Argyris and Schon (1974) and Brookfield (2017). I struggled to find a model which I was completely happy with and decided upon using elements of each in order to help me to reflect.

'Self-study research refers to teacher educators researching their practice with the purpose of improving it, making explicit and validating their professional expertise and, at the same time, contributing to the knowledge base of teacher education' (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2015: 508). Self-study involves using methods that facilitate a stepping back, a reading of our situated selves as if it were a text to be critically interrogated and interpreted within the broader social, political, and historical contexts that shape our thoughts and actions and constitute our world. (Pithouse et al. 2009: 45) This form of research appealed to me because it allowed me, as an educator, to examine my practice and to make improvements to it for the benefit of my students and others. It has a narrower scope than action research in that the researcher is the primary subject of the study and it

is also focused on individual self development. However, it is noteworthy that others can also learn from the individual person's self development research.

Educational Action Research appeals to me as it adds the dimension of 'living theory', as outlined by Whitehead (1989). A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work (Whitehead, 1989). Rather than research being carried out by people outside of the classroom it is carried out by those who are currently working in the practice area for the betterment of their teaching and learning. Whilst the main purpose of research is to create new knowledge and understanding for us, to help us know something we did not previously know (Bassey, 1995), 'the additional and necessary purpose of practitioner research is to try as best we can to put that new knowledge to practical use.' (Dadds, 2009). Therefore this type of research allows me not only to identify issues within my practice, but also to develop strategies to solve these issues.

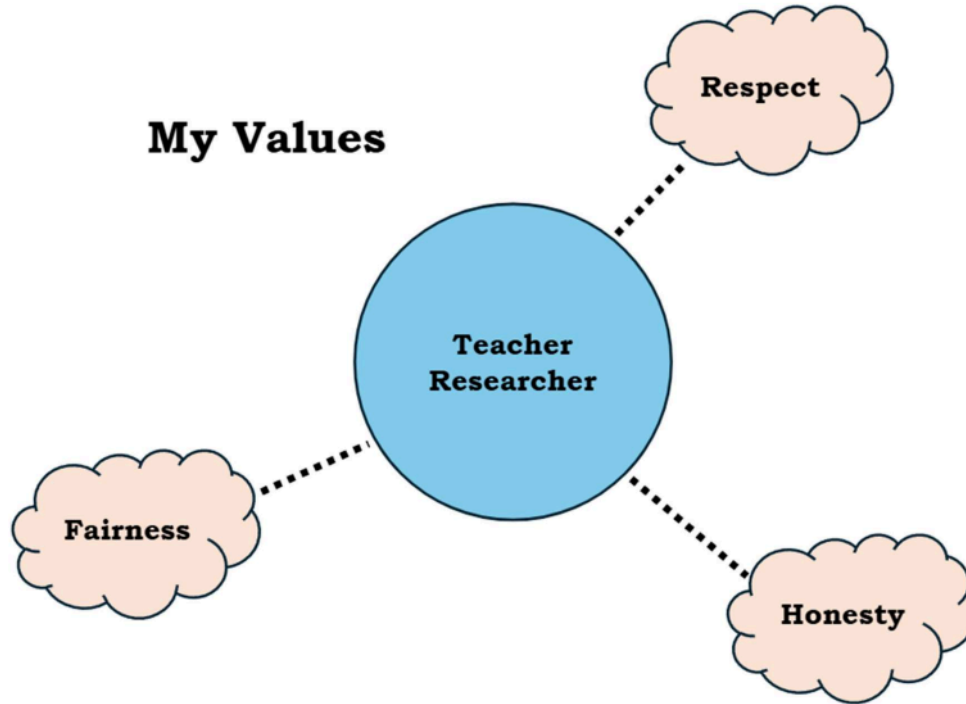
3.5 Values

Action research is value laden and value led. (Pollard & Anderson 2008, Cohen et. al 2018). Our ontological beliefs give rise to our epistemological beliefs, which give rise to methodological considerations. These in turn give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection (Glenn, 2024).

My ontological values are honesty, respect and fairness. These values guide both my personal and professional life. These values have been shaped and moulded in my professional life through my interactions with students, colleagues and other stakeholders in education. I have experienced honesty, respect and fairness during my time as a teacher and I enjoy the feeling that treating people with these values entails. I also enjoy feeling like I have been treated in line with these values. Whitehead says 'Living Theory' goes beyond action and emphasises 'the importance of clarifying, sharing and being

accountable to the unique constellation of personal and relational ontological values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives' (Whitehead 2018a: 3).

Figure 3.2-My Values



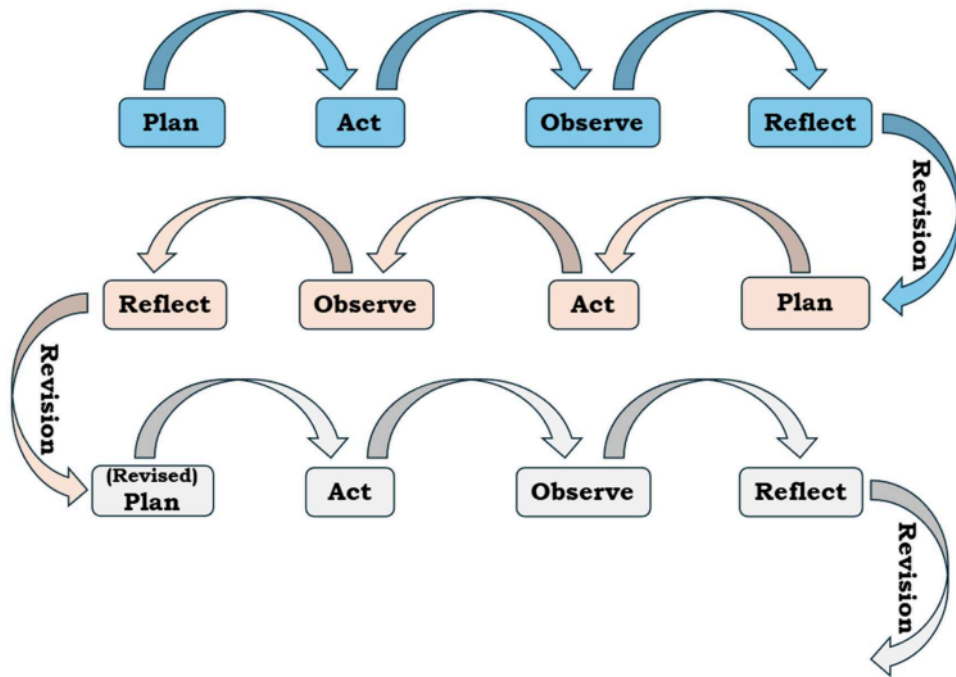
My view of knowledge has evolved over time. I used to think that it was something which one person imparted on another. This type of knowledge acquisition is what Freire (1970) refers to as the 'banking concept' of knowledge. However, my epistemological values have changed and I no longer see myself as the imparter of knowledge. Instead I see my students as active agents in their own learning.

I also learn from them. Freire (2003: 63) describes this succinctly when he states, 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow'. My role as the teacher is as a facilitator of learning. I believe that Vygotsky's zone of proximal development discussed in chapter

two is paramount in providing my students with opportunities to acquire new knowledge. It is especially relevant when considering language acquisition as I do in my project.

In essence AR is a value based paradigm, which is cyclical in nature, adopts a collaborative approach, involves reflection and benefits from dialogue with others.

Figure 3.3-Action Research



3.6 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research regards people as anticipatory, meaning-making beings who actively construct their own meanings of situations and make sense of their world and act in it through such interpretations (Cohen et. al 2018) It is a more subjective type of research than objectively defined quantitative research. Qualitative approaches are now accepted as equal in value to quantitative approaches when used appropriately (Avison, 1999).

Clark et al. (2020) suggest that the aim of qualitative data collection is to build a complex and nuanced description of the situation from multiple perspectives.

It is the method of data collection that is widely used in AR. AR is a form of practice which involves data gathering, reflection on the action as it is presented through the data, generating evidence from the data, and making claims to knowledge based on conclusions drawn from validated evidence (McNiff, 2011). Qualitative data use allows for this process to be subjective.

A particular strength of qualitative methods is their value in explaining what goes on in organisations. (Avison, 1999) Qualitative research allowed me to think about my students and their needs, likes and dislikes and learning styles. It also allowed me to consider their unique learning environment and socio economic area. Therefore I decided to engage in qualitative research in the carrying out of my project.

3.7 Data Collection

3.7.1 Research Participants

The participants in the research were a multigrade mixed class ranging from fourth class to sixth class. There are fourteen students in total-five fourth class students, six fifth class students and three sixth class students. Three of the students were identified as having special educational needs. The level of Irish within the class was poor and as a result I knew I needed to adopt a simplified approach within the research. I wanted to make small changes which would benefit the group and ultimately improve their acquisition of the Irish language. In keeping with my values of honesty and fairness I couldn't inflict sweeping changes that were beyond the capabilities of the class' current language abilities.

The research also included my critical friend who is a personal friend and an experienced educator. She is a deputy principal and SEN coordinator (SENCO) in another school. ‘A critical friend is someone who agrees to become involved in your research from the beginning and to give critical feedback at various stages during the research process’. (Glenn et. al, 2023). As stated by McNiff (2009), ‘Your critical friends should be willing to discuss your work sympathetically but critically’. I felt that the person I chose as a critical friend fitted this criteria succinctly.

I also had a validation group of four people-my principal, my vice principal, another teacher from my school and my critical friend.

3.7.2 Research Site

The research took place in a small DEIS band one school in the west of the country. The school has sixty five students in total. It is a relatively new school having been set up in 2017. Covid-19 hampered enrolments in the school, which means it hasn’t grown in size in accordance to projected enrollments. There are currently three mainstream class settings and three autism classes. It was very difficult to obtain consent from the parents for the research to take place. Therefore I knew the research would have to take place within the classroom, rather than at home. This lack of engagement from parents is a common issue in the current setting and rather than viewing it as an obstacle to the research, I decided to develop methods of research which didn’t allow this to become a barrier.

3.7.3 Research Design

Figure 3.4-Research Design

Preparation	
6th-30th January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Research project shared with the class ● Consent sought from those who need to give it ● Meeting with critical friend ● Meeting with supervisor to discuss methods chapter and action plan
1st-7th February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pupil questionnaires on their attitudes to learning Irish at the moment
CYCLE 1	
10th-28th February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New approaches to teaching Irish introduced ● Daily games-Deir O Gradaigh, Cluiche Kim to set the mood and get the children into the zone to learn Irish ● Word Wall introduced in classroom ● Reflections recorded in reflective journal ● Observations written incidentally in classroom during Irish lessons ● Discussion with critical friend about cycle one
CYCLE 2	
3rd-20th March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Daily games continued at start of the lesson ● Wordwall used in classroom ● Children to create an Irish poster using ICT to demonstrate their learning ● Meeting with validation group about cycle 2 ● Discussion with critical friend about cycle 2 ● Reflections in reflective journal ● Observations written in class about lessons
CYCLE 3	
20th March-4th April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaborative ICT lessons to demonstrate learning by producing a written piece ● Watching cartoons as Gaeilge ● Follow up interview with children ● Posters shared with the school community on common walls in the school ● Final meeting with critical friend
7th April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analysis of data collected during the three cycles ● Discussion with supervisor

3.7.4 Indicators of Success

1. Can I find examples of the students enjoying Irish?
2. Can I identify an improvement in language acquisition of the Irish language?

3.7.5 Research Instruments

Data collection is an important aspect of your research and needs to be undertaken in a stringent and rigorous manner. By rigorous, we mean that the data collected should be accurate, credible and honestly reflect the situation in your practice. (Glenn et. al, 2023) Firstly I needed to gather data relating to the situation before I started my research. I used two different data collection tools for this-questionnaires and my reflective journal. During my research I used written observations along with meta reflections in my reflective journal. At the end of my research I used interviews with the children to collect more data and to ensure triangulation of the data.

3.7.6 Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a relatively simple and easy method to use to collect data. They can be cheap, reliable, valid, quick and easy to complete. (Cohen, 2018) However the planning of a questionnaire can take time and the researcher needs to be cognisant that the data obtained is actually relevant to the research questions asked. I decided to use open ended questions to ask my students for their thoughts on learning Irish in my classroom, what they enjoyed, didn't enjoy and what they found difficult about Irish. I felt this method would give me a good baseline of the situation before the research.

3.7.7 Reflective Journal

A reflective journal is a ‘Storehouse for your thinking’ (Glenn, 2016) and is a key source of data. It can be used to give a timeline to your research and also to allow the opportunity to reflect on your teaching. Schön (1989) identified two types of reflection-reflection-in-practice and reflection-on-practice. My journal allowed me to reflect on practice before beginning the research to see how the situation was previously. I extensively reflected in practice to ensure I was keeping in line with my values of honesty and fairness in my teaching. Educators who use PAR to study some aspect of their practices need data to back up their research process and frequently draw on their reflective journals for part of that data (McNiff, 1993; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995; Sumara & Carson, 1997). Your own views can be gleaned from scrutinising your reflective journal, in which you will have recorded the story of your learning through your reflections on your actions and thoughts throughout the research process (Glenn et. al, 2023)

3.7.8 Interviews

An interview allows in-depth personal probing of a response until researchers feel they understand the answer and its implications to their topic. (James, 2007) Semi structured interviews are developed when researchers know what the literature says about their topic and map out pertinent questions with possible probing subquestions. (James, 2007) In a semi structured interview, the topics and questions are given, but the questions are open ended and the wording and sequence may be tailored to each individual interviewee and the responses given with prompts and probes. (Cohen, 2018). I decided to use semi structured interviews at the end of my research to see if my co researchers (my students) felt that the interventions had worked. I used the responsive interview method as designed by Rubin (2012) as it was proven as an effective interview technique. I was cognisant that if the interviews were not structured it would lead to divergence from the research topic

and also they would not cater for each individual in the class. The semi structured nature of the interview allowed me to assist those who needed it. Therefore I decided to use semi structured interviews to ensure the students had a good opportunity to express themselves.

3.7.9 Observations

Patton (1990:202) suggests that observational data should enable the researcher to enter and understand the situation that is being described. This was a great way for me to take a step back and to examine what was happening during Irish lessons in my class. Observations also allowed me to record successes and failures in the moment in lessons which I could reflect on at a later stage in my reflective journal.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

I received ethical approval from the University for my research proposal. Next I needed to gain permission from my school's Board of Management (BOM) to carry out the research. I sent them a letter which outlined the research. It included my aims, my proposed methodologies and my methods of data collection in an effort to gain informed consent from them. The basis of informed consent is a complete disclosure of the reasons, benefits, risks, and potential outcomes of the research (James, 2007). I explained that my students would be co researchers in the research and that my aim was to research my own practice. I also sent a letter to the parents of the children in my classroom to inform them of my research and to ask for their consent to it.

3.9 Power Dynamics

Next I spent time explaining the research to my class. Children are classed as a vulnerable cohort (Tulsa, Department of Children and Youth Affairs Act, 2011) of people so I knew that I must spend time explaining what my research was about, what was expected of them and what would be done with the data. I also needed to obtain informed assent from them. The children's parents offered consent on their behalf but I also sought assent from them. There is an imbalance of power between a teacher and a student and sometimes students can do things just to impress the teacher. I was cognisant of this and ensured that the children knew assent could be withdrawn at any time without any penalty.

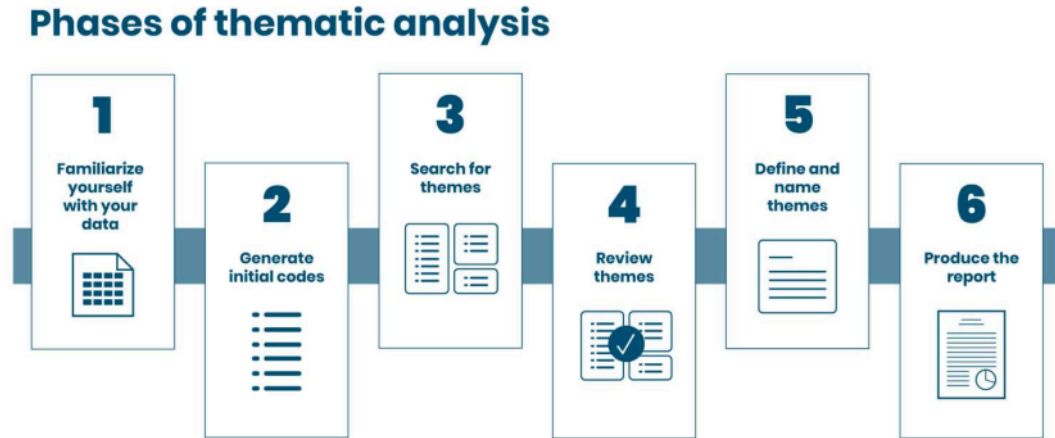
3.10 Data Storage

The data was stored in a folder on my laptop which is password encrypted. The children's journals were stored in a locked cabinet when they weren't in use. My reflective journal was kept in my school bag, along with all recorded observations. When the research cycles were complete the physical data was stored in a locked box in my house and will be kept there for a period of five years. All data was stored in compliance with GDPR standards.

3.11 Thematic Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyse the data collected and to organise it into themes. Thematic analysis is defined as the method for identifying and analysing different patterns of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) There are six stages of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke 2006). The stages are outlined in the diagram below (Eubanks Fleming, 2023)

Figure 3.5-Phases of Thematic Analysis



3.12 Limitations

There are limitations associated with this research. It relates to my specific class in my specific setting at a particular period of time. The fact that I am teaching in a multigrade classroom also offers a uniqueness to the research. The themes chosen in my thematic analysis are also my individual themes and others might have chosen different themes. Another limitation that I became aware of arose when I embarked on getting consent for my research. It was very difficult to obtain parental and guardian consent and it did involve a lot of reminding. This led me to decide that the research could only be conducted within the class as parental involvement would be minimal.

3.13 Conclusion

I decided on Educational AR as my methodology as I felt it would allow me to use subjective qualitative data to research the unique situation and learning environment of

my cohort of students. It would also allow me to ensure that I'm applying my values to my work and to ensure I'm not a 'Living contradiction' as set out by Whitehead (1998). I decided to use an array of qualitative research methods to ensure the triangulation of my data. I also ensured I adhered to ethical standards and was GDPR compliant at all times.

Chapter 4- Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Introduction

The aim of my SSAR project was to enhance my practice in teaching Irish in a multigrade DEIS school. This chapter outlines the process I undertook to analyze the data that I collected throughout the project. I employed thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), who define it as, "...a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke ,2006, p.79).

The first step involved familiarising myself with the data, which included pre-intervention questionnaires, classroom observations, my reflective journal and post intervention interviews. I then began generating initial codes within the data. I used different highlight colours to identify and categorise recurring patterns. These codes were subsequently organised into overarching themes, following the six phase framework as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019).

Initially I identified over thirty codes. Through a process of review and refinement, I organised these codes into three main themes. Each theme had two subthemes, which will be discussed below, along with the findings that emerged under each.

Figure 4.1- Sources of Data

Pre Intervention		
Questionnaires		
Reflective journal		
Cycle One	Cycle Two	Cycle Three
Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal
Meta Reflections	Meta Reflections	Observations
Observations	Observations	Post Intervention Interviews

Figure 4.2- Themes and sub themes

Indicators of Success:		
<i>Can I find examples of the students enjoying Irish?</i>		
<i>Can I identify an improvement in the language acquisition of the Irish language?</i>		
Heightened Learner Interest	IT as a methodology	The Criticality of Play
Living language Agency	IT skills Collaborative learning	Motivation Confidence

4.2 Theme 1: Heightened Learner Interest

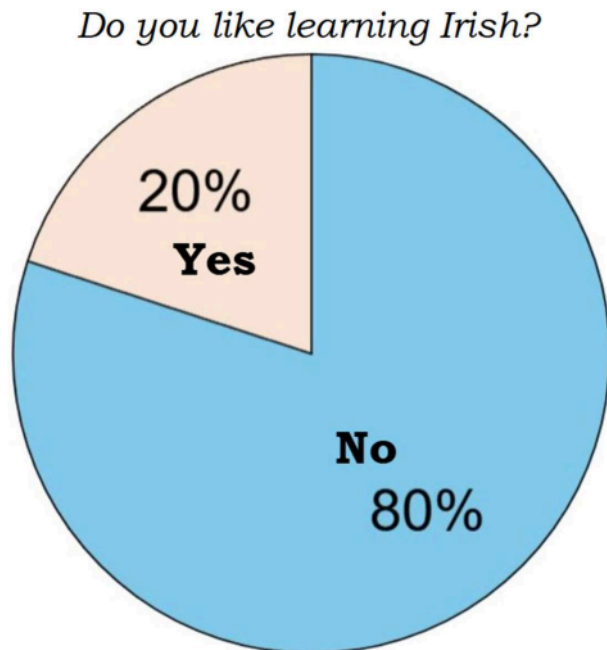
4.2.1 Consent

Obtaining consent for my research project from the parents of the children in my class proved difficult. They were very slow to return the consent forms and there appeared to be a general lack of engagement or interest in the project. Despite multiple reminders and informal conversations at the school gate the response rate remained low. For this reason I decided to focus solely on the children in the class as participants in the research. I felt there would be a lack of engagement from the parents which would prevent me from collecting enough data if I engaged them in the data collection process.

4.2.2 Finding 1: Heightened Learner Interest ensued when the Children became Agents in their own Learning

Prior to implementing any interventions, I asked all of the research participants to partake in a pre research questionnaire about their feelings about learning Irish. The questionnaire consisted of five open ended questions, and the results of the questionnaire were used to decipher the attitudes of the children to learning Irish.

Figure 4.3-Do you Like Learning Irish?



It was reported by the students that the vast majority did not like learning Irish. Only twenty percent of those surveyed said that they liked learning Irish. This finding aligns with the Children's School Lives study (2020) which found that only 22% of nine year olds surveyed stated that they always liked Irish and 29% identified Irish as their least favourite core subject.

However, while the School Lives Study provides useful national level statistics, it doesn't account for the often complex and content specific challenges faced in DEIS band one schools. My own study found that the lack of interest in learning Irish was not only because of the perceived difficulty of learning the language, but also by a lack of support at home and limited cultural relevance. It is important to remember that national studies give an overview and are not specific to localised areas.

The primary reason given for this in my classroom was that they found it difficult to remember the words. This indicated low intrinsic motivation and weak learner interest. As Clarke (2022) aptly notes, ‘When children have interest, education happens’. Therefore, I needed to implement strategies that would stimulate the children’s interest in learning Irish.

4.2.3 Irish as a ‘Living Language’

Another key barrier to learning Irish was that the students perceived that Irish had little practical value. They reported not encountering Irish in their lives outside of the classroom, thus failing to see it as a ‘living language’. This mirrors the findings of O Toole (2023), who noted the scarcity of opportunities for children in EMEs to experience Irish in authentic contexts. Similarly, Ó Duibhir (2019) also referred to Irish not being categorised as a living language when he stated that children see it as a school subject only.

These insights led me to conclude that the interventions used in the SSAR project needed to make Irish feel more relevant and enjoyable. By integrating Irish into activities that felt meaningful and engaging, I hoped to reposition it as a language that could be experienced, not just studied.

4.2.4 Agency

Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices (Bandura, 2001). It is the ability to control one’s own learning (Van Lier, 2008). It is something that people do: not have (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

The value of agency in education has been widely acknowledged, particularly within sociocultural theory. Great thinkers like Dewey and Freire were early proponents of child-centred, participatory learning. Duckworth (2016) also advocated for agency in her extensive research on grit. It is particularly advocated for in sociocultural theory.

The PLC promotes its usage in order to develop language learning in schools. While not explicitly mentioned in the document, it does mention motivation and choice, learner autonomy and child-centred learning, which are all core components of agency. As this curriculum is now in place in Ireland it would be prudent to ensure that agency is promoted in my lessons.

However, while the PLC promotes a child-centred learning environment it offers limited practical guidance on how to operate such an environment in a disadvantaged area. In practice constraints such as limited time, an overloaded curriculum, high needs and low parental engagement can make the realisation of these principles very challenging. In essence my research has identified a gap between policy and practice. This gap must be bridged with more tailored strategies suited to the learning environment and classroom reality.

My research has demonstrated that when the students felt a sense of agency over their work, they were more engaged with it and enjoyed it. They also were better able to acquire the language. Scaffolding during lessons, with a view to leading to student competency, was a key component in success. The element of choice over the three cycles helped to achieve this.

In cycle one the children got to choose the words for the word wall themselves which allowed them agency. I recorded a conversation with a student in my observations during a Balla Focail lesson.

‘I liked that we got to choose the words because Teacher would have chosen harder words than we did. I was able to choose the easy words that I kept forgetting. I knew I would be able to learn these but some of the harder ones would have been too hard, and I would have given up’

Harvey, 27th February 2025

In cycle three they also got to choose which cartoon to watch as Gaeilge. This gave them the opportunity to make decisions and to be responsible for their own learning.

I observed,

‘Today the students voted to watch Spongebob for five minutes. As they knew the cartoon they engaged with it and found his name in Irish hilarious. They were trying to directly translate Spongebob’s name from English to Irish. They were also listening intently for the names of the other characters to see if they were the same or different. It gave them the opportunity to enjoy the language, and they also felt they had decided what to watch so were interested’.

Harvey 20th March 2025

Introducing more student agency in the lessons allowed the children to develop their interest in the subject. They were aware that the interest in Irish from home was not very positive but using alternative methods to engage with the language was a good way to spark their interest in it. Given that Irish is a compulsory subject that they will study for many years, it is crucial to help them to develop a more meaningful and positive relationship with the language.

When they enjoyed it and showed interest they would progress better in it rather than if it was viewed negatively. By allowing agency I was living more closely with my values of fairness and respect. I was demonstrating fairness by allowing the students autonomy over their learning, while also being respectful.

4.3 Theme 2-IT as a Methodology

After reading about Sugata Mitra’s ‘Hole in the Wall’ experiment I was convinced that I needed to use technology in my cycles of intervention. Mitra conducted an experiment where he placed a computer connected to the internet in a slum in Delhi. The children, who had no prior experience with computers, managed to learn how to use it using trial

and error and taught each other. I was inspired by his commitment to collaborative learning and his belief that children can take responsibility for their own learning.

Mitra is not without his critics. Didau (2015) referred to him as an ‘Irresponsible charlatan’ while Clark (2005), Arora (2010) and Warshauer (2003) were also very critical of his work. They believed his studies lacked empirical evidence and didn’t use enough of a sample size to truly yield results. I did not entirely agree with elements of Mitra’s work, especially in relation to my environment, but I felt the use of IT in collaborative groups at the end of a block of learning could help to motivate my students to improve their acquisition of the Irish language. Mitra’s work inspired me to use IT in research cycle two and three, albeit in a way tailored to my specific content.

A further influence on my decision to use technology came from observing my students’ interest in online gaming. The CyberSafeKids survey (2024) surveyed seven thousand Irish students and 53% of children aged between eight and twelve years of age admitted that they felt that they spent too much time playing games online. This affirmed my belief that technology would appeal to my students because it aligns with their interests and experiences.

In addition, I was mindful of the *Digital Learning Framework for Schools*, which encourages the purposeful use of technology to enhance learning and support the development of 21st century skills. Incorporating IT in Gaeilge lessons allowed me to meet some of the framework’s key domains, particularly in relation to learner engagement and digital literacy.

During Research Cycle Two the class used ipads to create posters showcasing their learning about animals. They really enjoyed this activity and while they focused more on image selection rather than engaging with the language, the activity sparked genuine engagement and supported collaborative learning. I wrote in my reflective diary,

‘Everybody loved this activity. There was engagement all over the room and collaborative learning happening very successfully. I will use this concept in the future as it was very effective’

Harvey, 20th March 2025

This observation supports research by Prensky (2001), who argued that students today are ‘digital natives’ and are more motivated when learning involves technology. Though the depth of linguistic engagement varied, the activity helped to establish positive emotional associations with learning Irish, which Dorneyi (1994) identifies as essential for long term motivation in language acquisition.

My observations from the making of the posters were also very interesting at this time. I wrote,

‘Pupil B struggled with using the ipad. He didn’t know how to input the pictures at all. However, his language acquisition of the vocabulary learned has been quite excellent. Therefore, the pairing of Pupil B and C together really worked as C has a lot of experience with using technology, but his language retention is quite poor. I felt the two children here were able to learn different skills from each other. There was definite evidence of collaborative learning in this lesson’.

This aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, where children achieve more through collaboration than independently. The pairing of students with different strengths fostered peer-to-peer scaffolding, allowing both to learn from each other.

4.3.1 Finding 2: Using IT really helped to promote Interest in the Language Acquisition of Gaeilge

4.3.2 Collaborative Learning

The ipad activities provided authentic opportunities for collaborative learning. I observed that the collaborative aspect allowed the children to share skills, support one another, and build confidence through cooperation.

Collaboration is a key element of sociocultural theory. Vygotsky termed the phrase, ‘what a child can do in a group today he can do alone tomorrow’ (1932). It was the essence of his zone of proximal development idea. When the children’s learning was scaffolded, particularly through learning from a peer, they became able to internalise the learning.

This finding also aligns with Gardner’s (1993) theory of Multiple Intelligences, particularly interpersonal and spatial intelligences, both of which are activated in group-based, design-oriented tasks. Some children who struggled with traditional learning methods thrived when the task allowed technological engagement, showing the value of varied, differentiated instruction.

During cycle three I decided to incorporate further use of IT. I decided to use it as a tool for the students to demonstrate their learning at the end of a topic. They were put in groups and were given a list of vocabulary related to the topic covered. The task was to write a piece of writing on the ipad. The aim here was to incorporate collaborative learning, IT skills and play and fun.

This methodology was initially difficult for the children. I modelled how to do it first on the interactive whiteboard and we wrote a piece together. This allowed me to apply the Hammond and Gibbons (2005) method of scaffolding for second language learning by following the steps of modelling, joint construction, guided practice and independent construction.

The groups were also ability based to give them a greater chance of success while working together. This scaffolding worked to support them to produce written pieces unaided.

The children in general liked using the ipads again even though they found this activity difficult. My reflective diary demonstrated this. I wrote,

‘The activity in which the students had to compose their own story using the vocabulary sheet was difficult for some. Even though a lot of mistakes were made in some cases, I loved to watch the groups working together and discussing sentence structure and what to include in the piece. I was particularly glad to see Pupil X taking the lead with the typing and presentation on the ipad as he is more confident with this than with the language. However, he still felt like he contributed to the group and felt valued within it’.

Harvey 3rd April 2025

4.4 Theme 3: The Criticality of Play

When I compared the initial pupil questionnaires to my own reflections in my reflective journals, I noticed that the children were not having fun in Irish lessons. On 7th January I wrote, ‘The children do not seem to be engaged in the Irish lesson today. They are not enjoying it. They give up when they don’t understand every word of a sentence, rather than focusing on what they do know and trying to work the rest out from the context. They need to take responsibility for their learning and to do this I feel they need to enjoy what they are doing more and almost forget that they are engaged in learning’. (Harvey, January 2025)

This reflection, coupled with the preliminary questionnaire, led me to the conclusion that the children needed me to facilitate their learning and provide fun for them. They needed to be provided with opportunities to learn that they enjoyed. They themselves had identified that the use of games was beneficial to their language acquisition in the questionnaires. I needed to facilitate the incorporation of games into lessons daily, but I also needed to allow them to develop their own unique methods of learning.

This finding was in keeping with Dewey's (1916) idea that children should learn through doing and should be active agents in their own learning. I needed to come up with ways in which the children got to engage in games but also were given autonomy over their own learning.

I also realised that this was the first time I had used questionnaires with my students regarding their learning. It was an effective way to decipher information from them. The PLC also refers to the need to give children the chance to engage in 'playful and engaging learning experiences'. Therefore, I needed to incorporate play in lessons.

During research cycle one I decided to spend time daily playing *Cluichí as Gaeilge* with the children. We used the games, '*Deir Ó Grádaigh*' and '*Cluiche Kim*' at the beginning of each lesson, building the vocabulary used as each day went by. The children got to choose which game we started each lesson with by democracy, giving them a sense of autonomy over their learning. I noted an increased level of engagement almost immediately. I had used games previously at different points but had never committed to using them daily. I found that they were a useful tool to get the children into the frame of mind to engage in Irish lessons.

I wrote, 'Since the beginning of the week the children get excited about the games and almost begin learning Irish without realising it. They are motivated to 'win' *Deir Ó Grádaigh* in particular and I've seen a huge improvement in their ability to do the actions immediately in the game. The enthusiasm isn't quite as obvious for *Cluiche Kim*. This seems to be because there is a greater emphasis on speaking the language rather than just carrying out the actions as in *Deir Ó Grádaigh*'. *Deir Ó Grádaigh* is in fact partial language immersion for the children so maybe it is a first step into immersion which has been proven to work by many theorists. I need to keep making the instructions more difficult to ensure I'm using the Vygotsky Zone of Proximal Development approach. (Harvey, 12th February 2025)

I was further impressed when the principal of the school, who is also a member of my validation group, reported to me that members of my class were playing ‘*Deir Ó Gradaigh*’ amongst themselves while she was observing them on yard duty. This emphasized that the approach of using games to begin each Irish lesson was a step in the right direction. Some excerpts from the children are given below.

‘I liked playing *Deir Ó Gradaigh*. I nearly won twice this week. I don’t like how hard it can be to remember the words of the things in the classroom. I can never remember the word for ‘map’.

Pupil B 7th March 2025

‘I don’t like learning new words in Irish. It’s hard. I like *Deir Ó Grádaigh* because it's fun. Making the Irish poster was great fun. I got to work with _____ and we had great fun picking out pictures of the different animals. I also learned how to download a picture on the tablets. I didn’t know how to do this before’.

Pupil E 21st March 2025

4.4.2 Balla Focail

In cycle one I also used a Balla Focail in the classroom. Every Friday the children were invited to pick three words to add to the Balla, which they had learned in the previous week, which they felt they could use in the future but might have trouble either spelling or remembering. When we started this process, the children were very slow to suggest words but by the end of the cycle there was a huge increase in the participation to add words.

At this stage we collaboratively made a list of all the words offered and adopted a voting system to decide which three to add to the balla. Effectively we made the Balla Focail into a game which appealed to the class. This progress was noted in the following extracts from my reflection learning log.

Reflection 14th February 2025	Reflection 28th February 2025
<p>Re Word wall</p> <p>I'm not sure the idea of the word wall is working. The children are very slow to suggest words for it and seem uncomfortable with it. I adapted it today slightly by asking them to first discuss suggested words in pairs in order to get some reassurance before sharing with the class. It worked somewhat in that three children offered suggestions after the pair work compared to one child the week before. I feel I need to keep the session light in relation to the word wall and to encourage and praise participation, no matter how little. Do I need to step back and allow the children to develop their own autonomy to pick words to increase their own language acquisition?</p>	<p>Word wall lesson</p> <p>The children were bursting to suggest words for the word wall today. It has nearly become a competition for them to get the best word up there. Compared to two weeks ago the level of participation has increased massively. Even pupil A who has never suggested a word before suggested two words today. We made a list of suggested words and voted on the best three based on the criteria of how often we would use them in the future. I really like how everybody is now getting involved. It was a slow process at the start but now I feel its use gives the children a sense of autonomy over their own learning. They have made it into a game and games are what they like to learn from.</p>

The balla focail was further evidence that when the children were having fun they enjoyed the language and acquired it.

'I liked that the word wall was there to give me ideas about writing sentences in Irish because sometimes I don't know what to write. Making the poster was fun. We used funny pictures.

Pupil D 14th March 2025

4.4.3 Motivation

This sub theme is closely intertwined with the theme of interest. When students were interested in learning their motivation to learn increased. This was particularly visible in cycle three when the children persevered to collaboratively write a piece of text. The motivation to succeed was unmistakable because no group gave up. They asked for help when needed but every group produced a written piece of work.

Gardner's Attitude/Motivation battery test (1985) made me reflect on the fact that my students were experiencing language anxiety. They were not motivated to learn Irish because they had a fear of failure. They focused on achieving perfection, rather than communicating. This was evidenced in my early reflections when I noticed that the children gave up when they didn't understand every word, rather than using the words that they did know to make meaning.

To overcome this problem, I introduced games and playful activities. Games reduced anxiety and created a relaxed environment for using the language. The games in the first two cycles built the motivation to succeed in cycle three evidenced by the production of digital work in groups. The games lessened the pressure on the students to understand every word perfectly, allowing them to focus more on participation and communication. This reflects Dorneyi's (2001) emphasis on the importance of positive emotional engagement in sustaining learner motivation. He argues that learners are more likely to persevere when they experience enjoyment and a sense of progress.

4.4.4 Confidence

Clement (1980, p.148) equated confidence in relation to second language acquisition as being composed of two parts-language anxiety and perceived communicative competence. He further categorised it in 1986 when he said, 'second language self confidence is a powerful determinant of motivated behaviour and the frequency of communication in the second language' (Clement, 1986, p. 271). This view is supported by MacIntyre and Gardner (2001) who demonstrated that anxiety can have a debilitating effect on language production, particularly in relation to oral language. I witnessed this in

my own classroom context at the beginning of my research when the children were hesitant to speak, gave up when they didn't understand every word and often relied on me to validate their responses.

Dorneyi (2005) linked confidence in language learning with self image and motivation. If learners have the desired image of themselves as competent and successful L2 speakers, they are more likely to put effort into learning the language to reduce the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves. (p. 106) In my context the lack of confidence was linked with low self belief. Pupils frequently expressed doubts about their ability to 'do' Irish which became a barrier to participation and progress.

To tackle this, I focused on creating supportive, playful and success-oriented learning experiences, in line with Ellis (2008), who emphasised that confidence grows through meaningful and successful interaction in the target language. The use of games in cycles one and two created an environment in which mistakes were accepted and expected as part of learning. As pointed out by Cameron (2001) young learners need interactive and engaging contexts to build communicative confidence. Therefore, my students were provided with games, movement, visual cues and collaborative repetition to help them to succeed.

The shift in confidence was evident across the different data sources. My observations across cycle two demonstrated a greater willingness by the children to speak Irish. One student commented, 'I'm less afraid to make a mistake talking to another student than in front of the entire class.' I recorded this quote in an observation during a lesson during cycle two. This aligns with Dorneyi and Ushioda's (2011) belief that learners are more likely to engage when classroom conditions reduce fear and promote emotional safety.

In cycle three confidence was evident in independent group work when the groups created a piece of text. All pupils contributed and most groups worked independent of the teacher, which was a significant improvement upon earlier cycles. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development is particularly evident here as the use of scaffolding and benefits

of peer support are clearly visible. The students built upon previous learning enabling them to become more autonomous and confident with the language.

Moreover, by fostering confidence, I was also honouring my own professional value of fairness. As a teacher in a DEIS band one school, I recognised that my students had previously limited success with the Irish language. By providing accessible, inclusive tasks in which they could achieve success I was actively working to rebuild their belief in themselves as capable language users. Bandura (2007) recognised this belief as essential to long term language development.

4.5.1 Meetings with Critical Friend and Validation Group

At the end of cycle one I met with my critical friend who doesn't work in my school. We discussed progress so far and I showed her my observations from the classroom. She particularly liked the increased level of engagement that now seemed to happen when Irish lessons began.

Following a meeting with the entire validation group I was pleased to hear about how others in my school had noticed an increase in use of Gaeilge from my class. They were now greeting others with, 'Dia duit' and, 'Conas atá tú?' This was huge progress from a class who has struggled with the subject for a long time.

4.5.2 Final Meeting with Critical Friend

During this meeting I confided in my critical friend that I no longer felt as apprehensive about teaching Irish as I had in the past. I had learned that even the slightest improvement in their language acquisition was a win. I was no longer comparing progress to progress that I had made in a previous school with the same class levels. I had a better understanding of the different components for achieving success and I was trying to ensure I was incorporating chances for success in my lessons.

It was a big learning curve for me that I only realised during this conversation. My critical friend also noticed a difference in my confidence about teaching Irish in a DEIS school. She remarked that I, ‘Seemed more relaxed about it and had moved my emphasis away from their progress to actually making it fun for them’. This comment echoed what Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) describe as a transformation in teacher identity, marked by a growing integration of professional values and practice.

I decided to revisit my criteria for success with the validation group. The following questions were asked:

Can I find examples of the students enjoying Irish?
Can I identify an improvement in language acquisition of the Irish language?

The answer was yes to both questions. I had numerous examples of the class enjoying Irish. I could also identify an improvement in language acquisition of the Irish language. Reports of children using Irish outside of the classroom had ensured this, but I had also noticed a better willingness of the students to use the language during Irish class.

4.6 Interviews

I interviewed the children to decipher how they felt about the interventions. I wanted to know if they felt that the interventions had made any difference to their experiences of learning Irish. I used the responsive interview method outlined by Rubin (2012). He suggests using three different types of questions, main questions, probes and follow up questions. I decided not to use questions that only offered a one-word answer.

I liked the conversational style of the responsive interview method as it gave me an opportunity to build rapport with the children on an individual basis. I also liked having the freedom to probe their answers to elicit more qualitative data from them. I used an app

called Otter to record these interviews and was able to generate a printout of the interview, which was very helpful to generate codes.

Being able to talk to each child one on one and to give them a chance to explain how they felt about the interventions provided a lot of data. Remarkably all children interviewed felt that the interventions had made a big impact in their enjoyment of Irish lessons. Some excerpts from some of the conversations are noted below.

Question: Can you tell me what you like and dislike about Irish?

‘My favourite part of Irish is that we play games every day. It helps me to remember things.

Question: Can you give me an example of how the games help you?

I used to get very confused with the word for ‘elbow’ but *Deir Ó Grádaigh* makes me remember it.

Question: What did you dislike about the Irish lessons?

At first I didn’t like making the poster because I’m not allowed on my ipad as much as the others in the class but then _____ showed me how to pick the pictures and put them in so I enjoyed it.’

Pupil B 4th April 2024

Question: How do you feel about learning Irish now?

‘I look forward to Irish now. Before I hated it. I like not using the book as it was boring. The ipads are fun and I like working with others to write in Irish because I find it very hard to write on my own’

Question: How does group work help you with writing?

‘It is easier to write on the ipad with others. If you forget a word others can help you remember it. You also get the chance to talk to others. Before when I tried to write in Irish alone I just gave up as I didn’t know what to do.

Pupil E 3rd April 2024

4.7 Conclusion

The thematic analysis taught me that the interventions had worked for me personally, as they had resulted in a mind shift. This shift was necessary to be a better Irish teacher in my current setting. I also felt I was living closer to my values of honesty, fairness and respect. I had been honest that there was a problem with my teaching of Irish. I had been fair by examining it and trying to find solutions to the issues. I had also shown respect to my students by developing ways to help them with their Irish language acquisition.

Chapter 5-Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The aim of my SSAR project was to explore ways in which I could enhance my own teaching of Irish in a DEIS band 1 multigrade classroom, with the ultimate goal being to improve my class' language acquisition. To achieve this, I used an array of methodologies over three research cycles.

In cycle one I focused on creating a low pressure, highly motivating classroom atmosphere by incorporating daily games into my lessons, with the aim of building confidence and enjoyment. I then used technology mediated learning to scaffold the learning in keeping with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development in cycle two. Finally in cycle three I used further scaffolding to challenge the children to collaboratively create a piece of text in Irish, encouraging peer interaction, autonomy and deeper engagement with the language.

This chapter contains a critical discussion of the key findings that emerged from these interventions, with particular focus on their impact on student engagement, confidence and learning outcomes. I will also reflect on the implications of these findings for my future practice. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of my research and offer recommendations for further research into Irish language acquisition in similar educational contexts.

5.2 Heightened Learner Interest through Agency and Living Language

A key factor which emerged over the three research cycles was the importance of learner interest in promoting deeper engagement with the language of Irish. It was the development of genuine learner interest, particularly through learner agency and exposure to Irish as a living language, that proved transformative for my students.

5.2.1 Agency as a Driver of Learner Interest

A major theme that emerged in cycles two and three was the positive impact of learner agency on student interest in Irish. When the students were given opportunities to make choices, like choosing pictures for their posters or choosing which cartoon to watch, they became more invested in the learning experience. This reflects the view of Bandura (2001), who identifies agency as central to human motivation and engagement. When students feel that they are active participants rather than passive recipients, they are more likely to sustain effort and interest in learning.

This also aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which emphasises that learning is most effective when embedded in socially meaningful contexts. Through their opportunities to make decisions about their own learning the students felt seen, respected and capable. All these qualities align with the ethos of the PLC, which promotes decision making and learner autonomy, albeit with little guidance on how to actually implement it in high need contexts such as my own. By embedding agency in my classroom, I was attempting to narrow the gap between curriculum aspirations and classroom realities.

5.2.2 Reframing Irish as a Living Language

Another major influence on learner interest was recreating Irish as a 'living language' rather than just as a school subject to be learned. Initially the students perceived Irish as irrelevant and confined to being a classroom subject. This finding mirrored the findings of the Children's School Lives Study (2020) and Ó Duibhir (2019) highlighting that children see Irish as a school-based subject rather than a meaningful form of communication.

This finding is more pronounced in my DEIS setting where Irish is seldom if ever encountered outside of school. Limited parental support to the learning of Irish compounds this situation. To counteract this, I introduced technology mediated learning

experiences to present Irish in a real life context that appealed to the students' interests outside of school. They became curious about the language and perceived it as fun when it offered the opportunity to use ipads.

Watching a cartoon as Gaeilge also allowed the students to experience it as a 'living language' in a real-life context. This finding aligns with O Toole's (2023) observation that Irish learners in English medium schools rarely get the opportunity to experience Irish in the real world. Repositioning it as something to be experienced rather than something to just be memorised heightened learner enjoyment. Irish moved beyond the realm of rote learning to something that could be fun and enjoyable.

This reframing of Irish was also grounded in my values. Honesty was important in admitting that the children didn't see or experience Irish in a positive light. I needed to be fair and offer opportunities for it to be accessible and enjoyable to them in order to show them respect and offer opportunities for success. In doing so I not only saw a shift in engagement but a transformation in the dynamics of the classroom. The children had become co constructors in their own learning rather than passive recipients.

5.3 Enhancing Engagement and Collaboration Through Technology

The transformative role of technology in promoting interest and collaboration in the learning of Irish was a key finding in my research. The incorporation of IT in research cycles two and three not only motivated the students, it was also a meaningful way to scaffold learning, promote autonomy and provide authentic opportunities for peer to peer collaboration.

5.3.1 Technology as a Motivator to Promote Language Acquisition in Irish

The use of ipads sparked a noticeable increase in student engagement in Irish lessons. It reengaged students who had previously thought of Irish as a burdensome subject. The CyberSafe Kids Survey (2024) which reported that over half of eight to twelve year olds

felt they spent too much time playing digital games, sparked a concept in me. It led me to the conclusion that the children's interest and experience with digital technologies could be leveraged to enhance learning.

Even though some students focused on the visual aspects of digital tasks more than the Irish language content, their positive emotional response lay the foundation for long term motivation to acquire the language. As Dorneyi (1994) suggests, positive emotional engagement is essential for language learning. Technology therefore was a catalyst to connect the students to new and meaningful interactions with the Irish language.

5.3.2 Technology Supporting Differentiation and Scaffolding

The use of technology provided the further benefit of allowing opportunities for differentiation and scaffolded learning. The pairing of students of differing strengths mirrored Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development by enabling children to reach higher levels of success together than they could achieve independently. This was particularly evident in the poster task in which children with good linguistic skills were paired with those with good technical skills and each had the opportunity to learn from the other. This type of mutual learning gave value to the competences of each group member and reinforced the importance of interdependence in learning. It was not only an Irish lesson, but a life lesson.

Technology also allowed for the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) to be activated. The intelligences that were evident were spatial and interpersonal intelligences. The poster task and the written task of cycle three allowed those who didn't flourish in the conventional classroom to participate in meaningful learning activities. This promoted inclusion and aligned with my values of fairness and respect by affording every student the opportunity to achieve success.

5.4 Motivation and Confidence Building Through Play

One of the most significant findings from research cycle one was the positive impact of play based learning on student motivation and engagement. My initial aim was to create a low-pressure learning environment in which the children would feel more relaxed about using the Irish language. Through daily games I noticed an immediate shift in the children's attitudes to learning Irish. Activities that were fun helped to lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and created a learning environment that was more conducive to language acquisition.

This supports Krashen's Affective filter hypothesis (1982), which suggests that emotional factors such as anxiety, motivation and self confidence can affect a learner's language acquisition. When the affective filter is lowered, learners are more likely to feel safe, confident and engaged, which leads to being more open to using language and absorbing it. The playful nature of the games increased student's willingness to participate in Irish lessons.

5.4.1 Motivation to Learn

Dorneyi's (2001) work on motivation emphasises the importance of creating meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences that tap into the learner's intrinsic motivation to learn. By involving the children in the process of choosing what game to play, I fostered a sense of autonomy and ownership, which increased engagement and sustained motivation over time.

5.4.2 Motivation linked to Interest and Confidence

Motivation in my classroom is strongly linked to enjoyment and self belief. My early observations, coupled with my initial survey, noted the children's fear of failure and hesitancy to make mistakes. Over time, this fear was replaced by engagement and willingness to take risks due to the success of the interventions introduced. The interventions, particularly the initial games, created a safe, playful and inclusive environment. This allowed me to scaffold the learning during the next two cycles of

intervention to align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to build on previous learnings.

The students' growing confidence was a key contributor to their increased motivation and participation. This point was supported by both Clement (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (2001). The writing tasks in intervention cycle three clearly demonstrated this shift. None of my students opted out of the activity. They worked together to create a piece of writing. This success would have been unthinkable before the interventions took place.

This finding aligns with my value of honesty. By being honest with myself and what I was witnessing in the classroom I allowed myself to identify the lack of confidence in my students. I became aware of their fears about learning Irish and their lack of engagement with lessons. My honesty in recognising this was the catalyst for meaningful change.

5.5 Challenging Assumptions: Surprising Finding

One of the more unexpected findings of my research was the disconnect between students' frequent use of technology outside the classroom and their actual digital literacy skills. Like many educators, I felt that because my students spent significant amounts of time on digital devices outside the classroom that this would equate to confidence and competence applying digital skills within the classroom. However, this was not the case.

During the poster task of research cycle two and the written task of research cycle three it became apparent that some students lacked basic digital literacy skills like inputting pictures and formatting text. While they were eager and motivated to use the ipads, they did need support at times navigating the demands of using them.

This finding echoes the 'digital narrative' put forward by Prenksy (2001). It also confirms the research of Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) who argue that, 'familiarity with digital devices for entertainment does not equate to digital competence in academic or productive contexts'.

This finding also prompted me to reflect on the Digital Framework for Schools (2017) document, which emphasises the importance of developing digital competencies alongside subject content. It became clear that using digital technology in the classroom was not enough. My students also needed structured and guided lessons on how to use it correctly. By incorporating collaborative learning in research cycles two and three I was affording them opportunities to develop language acquisition and digital literacy skills simultaneously.

This finding had significant implications for my future practice. I needed to ensure that I continued to incorporate digital learning in my lessons, but also that explicit instruction on digital skills is also incorporated. Digital skills must be taught not assumed. This was particularly relevant in my DEIS band one context because although the students were regularly using digital devices at home, access to guided digital learning experiences were limited. They were often unsupervised and using the devices for entertainment purposes. I needed to focus on bridging the gap to ensure that my students were not just consumers of digital technology, but that they were also competent users of it.

The TPACK programme (Mishra and Koehler, 2006) highlights the integration of technology, pedagogy and content knowledge as essential for effective teaching. It emphasises that using technology in isolation is insufficient. Teachers must understand how digital tools can enhance both the subject matter and the instructional strategies to support meaningful learning. This programme could be used to ensure the purposeful use of technology in Irish lessons and the meaningful effect of IT incorporation on language acquisition.

5.6 Critical Reflection on Professional Learning

One of the most profound aspects of engaging with my SSAR project was that it gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own practice, mindset and role as a teacher. While my initial goal was to improve the learning experiences and language acquisition of my

students, I also embarked on a journey of professional growth and transformation. As McNiff (2020) notes the action research was, ‘a practical way of looking at my work to check it was as I’d like it to be’, highlighting the reflective nature of the process and the potential to foster both personal and professional development.

At the outset I believed that my students’ struggles were largely equated with external factors such as lack of exposure to the language and lack of parental support for learning the language. However, this research taught me that I needed to examine my own assumptions, methods and expectations more honestly.

Through analysing my observations, reflective journal, meetings with my critical friend and interviews with my students I realised that there was a gap between my aspirations as a teacher and my actual classroom practice. Despite my best intentions I had not always fostered a learning environment that allowed for agentic learning, playfulness or emotional safety. This action research process became a targeted project on closing this gap.

I learned to let go of a rigid, teacher-centred approach and opted for a more child responsive one which was far more flexible. By incorporating small changes such as more playful opportunities and technology, I saw that small changes could lead to a massive shift in motivation and engagement in the Irish language in my class. These interventions were not only useful for my students. They also allowed me to experience a renewed vigour and willingness to teach Irish. I enjoyed the shifts in mindsets in my classroom.

Engaging with the research and obtaining feedback from my students, critical friend and validation group allowed me to be more reflective on my practice and more prepared for the learning environment I was in. I was no longer equating my current students’ language acquisition with previous success in different contexts. I learned to embrace the DEIS band one context in which I was now teaching, and I learned to adapt my lessons to meet the needs of those in front of me, rather than to teach lessons which I previously thought they should understand. My critical friend, in particular, noticed a big shift in my mindset

as regards teaching Irish in my current setting. She commented that I had learned to meet the students where they were at rather than comparing them to previous settings. Her honest feedback kept me accountable and honest with myself during the process.

Overall, this research has deepened my understanding of how children learn and how teachers grow. I have learned the importance of meaningful reflection and how to honestly examine my own practice and beliefs. I now feel a lot more confident in teaching Irish in my DEIS band one multigrade setting.

5.7 Implications for Practice

This SSAR project has had a significant impact on my understanding of successful teaching pedagogy for Irish language acquisition, particularly in the context of a multigrade DEIS band one classroom. It has led to several practical shifts and changes in the way I will teach Irish going forward.

5.7.1 Reposition of the Teacher as the Facilitator

I recognised that I needed to reposition my own role in the classroom. I am no longer the direct instructor, but rather I am the facilitator of the learning. When I allowed my students more autonomy, particularly by using IT in the classroom, I observed higher levels of engagement and active participation in lessons. Standing back allowed students to collaborate, explore and take ownership of their learning, while I provided targeted scaffolding where necessary, in line with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development.

This approach also reflects Dewey's (1938) emphasis on experiential, student-based learning. The integration of technology supported this process, consistent with Mishra and Koehler's (2006) TPACK framework, which highlights the importance of combining technological, pedagogical and content knowledge to create effective learning environments.

This shift not only supported student-centred learning, but also reinforced the importance of creating a classroom environment where learners feel empowered to take initiative and construct knowledge meaningfully and independently.

5.7.2 Embracing Play and Enjoyment as Legitimate Pedagogical Tools

The success of play-based learning, particularly at the beginning of the research during cycle one, was central to the motivation and enjoyment of my students. It allowed them to experience Irish in a positive light and it lowered the affective filter (Krashen, 1981), reduced anxiety and created a positive learning environment. As a result I now see play not just as a time filler or reward for academic progress. It is an important and vital pedagogy, especially in schools in which the children experience disadvantage. It can create equitable opportunities for engagement and success (Froebel, 1826, Vygotsky, 1978) Incorporating play into my lessons has changed my mindset, reaffirming the value of enjoyment in learning, while also renewing my enthusiasm for teaching Irish.

5.7.3 Using IT Purposefully

While using IT as a methodology during cycles two and three was very motivating and engaging for the learners, I learned that frequent exposure to digital devices outside of the classroom does not equate to digital literacy. Effective integration of IT requires purposeful planning and scaffolding to ensure that learners develop both technological competence and language proficiency. When used thoughtfully, technology can support active engagement, collaboration, and meaningful language practice, consistent with Mishra and Koehler's (2006) TPACK programme, which emphasises the integration of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge. Moving forward I will continue to incorporate IT into my lessons, but with intentional design to maximise both language acquisition and digital skill development.

5.7.4 Sustaining Reflective Practice

Initially I was not particularly enthusiastic about reflective practice, and I viewed it as a potential waste of time. However, engaging in this SSAR has taught me that it is a vital element in the practice of a dedicated teacher who is committed to continuous learning. It has provided a structured opportunity to bridge the gap between how I saw myself as a teacher and how I actually taught in the classroom

I have also learned that reflection is not only a research tool, but a professional habit. As Schon (1983) notes, reflective practice enables practitioners to learn from experience, adapt strategies and refine their professional identity. Similarly McNiff (2020) emphasises that action research offers, ‘a practical way of looking at your work to check if it is as you would like it to be’. Moving forward I will continue to employ reflective practices to ensure that I am continually evolving and striving to be the most effective version of myself as a teacher.

5.8 Limitations of the Study

While this research has provided valuable insights into teaching Irish in a DEIS band one multigrade setting several limitations of the research must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research was carried out in a single urban DEIS band one setting. Therefore, the findings are context specific and cannot be applied to all educational settings. What worked in my classroom may not be directly transferable to different settings or demographics.

5.8.1 Research Bias

While every effort was made to ensure the validity of my research and to ensure the triangulation of my data, there is an element of bias to it. It was interpreted by me through my own perceptions and values. Secondly, while every effort was made to explain to the children to be honest in their questionnaires and interviews, I am their teacher and at times I felt the answers given were to impress me rather than a true account of their honest feelings.

5.8.3 Time Limitations and Qualitative Data

The research took place over three research cycles during the course of one academic year. This is a relatively short amount of time to examine language acquisition. The study was also based solely on qualitative data which meant there was no systematic quantitative assessment of language acquisition in a measurable way. While improvements in motivation, engagement, confidence and language acquisition were evident they were not quantified numerically.

5.8.4 Digital Literacy Competencies

An unexpected finding was the gap between the time spent online by students and their actual digital literacy skills. My initial assumption that access to digital technologies outside the classroom equated to digital literacy proved flawed. This finding was specific to my context and resulted in more time being spent on explaining how to use the technology correctly.

5.9 Recommendations for Future Study

The work of this research shows that several other avenues of further study are required in the medium term. Further research should examine Irish-language acquisition over multiple school years, with particular attention to play based and engaging methodologies (Moyle, 2015). Consideration should also be given to how digital learning might support this process, given the role of technology in fostering motivation and new literacies (Leu et. al, 2013). There is a need for a scaffolded approach to develop both sets of skills simultaneously. (Vygotsky, 1978)

Away from the strict confines of classroom teaching, further related research needs to be carried out on how to reposition Irish as a ‘living language’ in non-Gaeltacht areas. (O’ Toole, 2023) Research into family and community engagement could be useful in order to develop the language and its usage beyond the classroom.

There is also a need for the development of targeted research in regard to how teachers in DEIS areas engage in continued learning about teaching Irish.(DEIS, 2017) A one size fits all approach of the PLC is not serving the most disadvantaged learners and research is needed to work out how best to support teachers to differentiate learner outcomes to suit the needs of the children rather than the requirements of the curriculum. (O’ Sullivan, et. al., 2019)

5.10 Conclusion

This SSAR project has been transformative both personally and professionally. What began as an inquiry into how to enhance my teaching of Irish in a multigrade DEIS band one school evolved into a deeply reflective learning journey that reshaped my understanding of creating a motivating learner environment, learner engagement and confidence and the role of agency in second language acquisition.

Through the implementation of three research cycles, I saw clear evidence that when students are given agency over their learning and opportunities to engage in playful and engaging methodologies they make sustained progress, even in disadvantaged areas. The use of digital technologies taught me about the surprising gap between time spent using digital devices and digital literacy. It taught me not to make assumptions about learners based on external factors. This was a massive learning moment for me.

The use of play, collaboration and agency allowed me to reduce the affective filter (Krashen, 1978) and promote confidence in learning aligning with the research of Vygotsky, Dorneyi, Krashen and Gardner. Learners began to experience Irish as more than a school subject. It became a method of communication for them. This shift of mindset was paramount in equating this SSAR with success.

Crucially, this SSAR also allowed me to live through my values and examine teacher reflection and vulnerability. I was challenged to examine my practice and to explore the gap between how I thought I taught and what was actually happening in my classroom. Through reflection I was challenged to honestly examine my practice and identify the ways in which I needed to change. I am now more committed to adapting my teaching to meeting the needs of my students rather than trying to meet the learner outcomes of the curriculum.

While limitations remain, particularly with regard to the time constraints of the research and the specificity to my current learning environment, this research has laid a strong foundation for continued professional development. The findings have immediate implications for my own setting and could also apply to similar DEIS settings.

Ultimately this thesis highlights the fact that change is possible, even in challenging settings. Teachers can make small changes to their practice that have massive implications for the teaching and learning taking place in their classrooms. A process of reflection challenges teachers to become aware of improvements necessary within their practice and to act on them.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval



Ethics Approval for Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Student name:	Emma Harvey
Student Number:	16251801
Supervisor:	Liam Mac Amhlaigh
Programme:	Masters in Educational Action Research
Thesis title:	How can I enhance my teaching of Irish in a mainstream class in a DEIS school?
Research Question(s):	What are the attitudes to learning Irish in my class? Are the children making quantifiable improvements?
Intended start date of data collection:	February 2025
Professional Ethical Codes or Guidelines used:	BERA guidelines

1(a) Research Participants: Who will be involved in this research?

	TICK ALL THAT APPLY
Early years / pre-school	
Primary school pupils	yes
Secondary school students	
Young people (aged 16 – 18 years)	
Adults	

1(b) Recruitment and Participation/sampling approach:

My class of 16 students is a mainstream class of 4th, 5th and 6th class students. All students will be involved in the research. All parents will be asked for permission for their child to be involved. Parents will also be invited to be involved in the research.

1. Summary of Planned Research

I plan to initially survey all participants on their attitudes to learning Irish. I then plan to carry out two cycles of interventions to focus on particular aspects of learning Irish. Finally, I will resurvey the children to see if there has been a change in their attitudes to learning the language. The work carried out during the two cycles of teaching will also be examined and the results quantified.

2. Ethical Issues:

At present there are no ethical issues which I am concerned about. I will ensure the anonymity of the participants in my research.

Declaration

'I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of undertaking this research.' If any of the conditions of this proposed research change, I confirm that I will re-negotiate ethical clearance with my supervisor.

Signed: Emma Harvey

Date: 17/11/2024

Attachments: *Please attach information letters, consent forms and other materials that will be used to inform potential participants about this research.*

Supervisor use only:

Date Considered:

Approved

Approved with recommendations

(see below) Referred back to

applicant

Referred to Department Research and Ethics Committee

Recommendations:

Signature of supervisor:

Appendix 2: Information Sheets and Consent/assent Forms

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

*Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.*

Information

Sheet Parents

and Guardians

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a student teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observation, reflective notes and questionnaires. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- How can I enhance my teaching of Irish in the mainstream classroom?
- What are the attitudes to learning Irish in my classroom?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation, Reflective Journal, Questionnaires etc.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Prof. Marie McLoughlin and Dr Suzanne O’Keeffe and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines.

Contact details: Student: *Emma Harvey E:*
Emma.a.harvey.2022@mumail.ie

Information letter for child

Child's name

I am trying to find out how children learn Irish in primary school. I would like to find out more about this. I would like to watch you and listen to you when you are in school and to write down some notes about you.

Would you be ok with that? Circle one. **YES** **NO**

I have asked your Mum or Dad or Guardian to talk to you about this. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that, could you sign the form that I have sent home?

If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.

Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

**Maynooth University
Froebel
Department of
Primary and Early
Childhood
Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.**

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

**I have read the information provided in the attached
letter and all of my questions have been answered. I
voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this**

study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

Parent / Guardian Signature

Date:

Name of Child _____

Child's signature: _____

Date: _____

Child's Assent Form

Child's assent to participate

My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me and I agree to take part in this research.

Name of child (in block capitals):

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Initial Student Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire before research cycles

1. How do you feel about learning Irish?

2. What do you like about learning Irish?

3. What do you dislike about learning Irish?

4. What could your teacher do to make Irish lessons more interesting?

5. What could you do to get better at Irish?

Appendix 4: Final Interview Questions and Prompts

Final Interview Questions

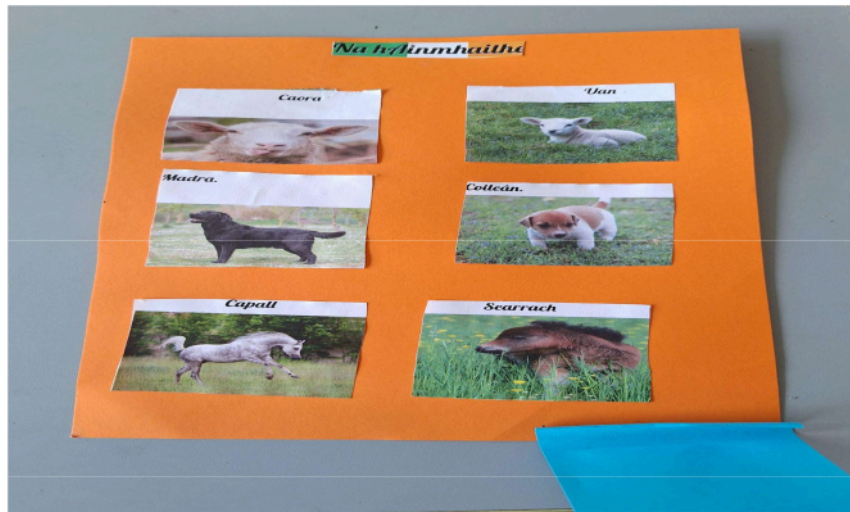
1. Have you enjoyed learning Irish during the three cycles? Why/why not?
2. What has changed?
3. What was your favourite lesson?
4. Is there anything in particular that you have enjoyed/not enjoyed?
5. Do you think your Irish has improved?
6. What have you learned about yourself and learning over the three cycles?

Appendix 5: Reflective Journal Prompts

Reflective Journal Prompts

1. How was the lesson received?
2. What was successful/unsuccessful?
3. Who made the most/least progress?
4. Are there any changes to the lesson I could make with the benefit of hindsight?
5. Considering Brookfield's Lens-autobiographical, student's lens, colleagues, literature is there any learnings I can take from this lesson?

Appendix 6: Sample Irish Posters



Appendix 7: Sample Written Pieces during Cycle 3

Chuaigh mé ag siopadóireacht. Cheannaigh mé milseáin, hata agus bríste. Níor cheannaigh mé geansaí. Bhí mé san ollmhargadh.

Chuaigh mé ag siopadóireacht. Cheannaigh mé geansaí nu sa siopa JD. Cheannaigh mé milseáin sa siopa milseáin. Cheannaigh mé cluiche ríomhaire nua sa siopa cluichí ríomhaire. Cheannaigh mé cóiplebhar sa siopa Easons. Cheannaigh mé arán san ollmhargadh.

I

Appendix 8: Balla Focail



Appendix 9: Sample of Coding

The children really enjoyed the use of the ipad today to make the posters. There were no adverse behaviours demonstrated during the lesson. Everybody was engaged and working together to achieve success. Pupil A and C worked well together as A has good Irish, while C has good digital literacy skills.

Appendix 10: Child A Initial Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire before Research Cycles

1. How do you feel about learning Irish?

I hate Irish. It's too hard to remember the words and it's boring. My ma says it's a pointless subject.

2. What do you like about learning Irish?

Lunch happens straight after it.

3. What do you dislike about learning Irish?

Everything. It is boring. I don't like it at all.

4. What could your teacher do to make Irish lessons more interesting?

Do it less. Maybe play more games.

5. What could you do to get better at Irish?

Concentrate more.

Appendix 11: Sample Post Interventions Interview Transcript Child B

Recorded using Otter

Teacher 0:11: Have you enjoyed learning Irish during the three cycles? Why or why not?

Child B: Yes, I have enjoyed learning Irish. I really liked making the posters because I got to work with other people. I like the fact that it's not so hard to remember the words. I like not using the textbook as much.

Teacher 0:37: What has changed?

Child B 0:40: Well, I enjoy Irish now, like it's not as boring as it used to be. It used to be the most boring subject in school. I like the word wall because it helps me to look up and find words when I'm stuck.

Teacher 0:59: What was your favorite lesson?

Child B 1:01: My favorite lesson was making the posters, because I loved putting in the pictures and working with the others to decide what picture to use.

Teacher 1:15: Is there anything in particular that you have enjoyed or not enjoyed?

Child B 1:19: Well, I still don't really enjoy having to learn Irish, but I enjoy the Irish lessons at school now.

Teacher 1:28: Do you think your Irish has improved?

Child B 1:34: Yes, I do think my Irish has improved. I definitely can make sentences easier.

Teacher 1:43: Yeah, it has

Teacher 1:46: What have you learned about yourself and learning over the three cycles?

Child B 1:52: I've learned that I can. With Irish before, I used to think I was really bad at it, but now I think I can learn it. I'm not the best in the class. But I can get better.