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Learning Irish in English-medium primary schools: what children’s experiences tell us about language learner autonomy.

**Abstract**

There is broad dissatisfaction regarding the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools, with multiple studies highlighting a decrease in children’s attainment and attitude towards the language. Children’s voices have largely been absent from discussions about teaching and learning Irish. This study addresses this gap in the research by documenting primary school children’s experiences in first class (7-year-olds) and fifth class (11-year-olds) using a qualitative methodology.

The conceptual framework, informed by Biesta’s domains of education, was used to provide coherence to second language learning theories. This was complemented by the work of Froebel, adding a child-centred, social constructivist perspective. A child-centred methodology was employed to support children in sharing their experiences, and data were analysed qualitatively using a thematic approach guided by the conceptual framework.

This study found that children had a narrow conceptualisation of Irish language learning, where they viewed themselves as passive, showing limited evidence of language learner autonomy. The findings also indicated that there was little development of language learning strategies between the first-class and fifth-class children.

This study suggests the need to give children ownership of their learning to support them as autonomous language learners, reflecting a Froebelian approach to the teaching and learning of Irish. Additional support for pre-service and in-service teachers would support this in practice.

**Keywords**

Irish language, children’s voices, language learner autonomy

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