

# Is Tusa an Múinteoir

## Introducing peer tutoring to Irish language lessons

This article describes a research project, *Is Tusa an Múinteoir* (You Are the Teacher), that aims to create meaningful domains for primary-level children to use the Irish language and to tutor it to their peers and parents. It outlines the structure and findings of the project and concludes with reflections and recommendations.



**Jane O'Toole**  
Primary school teacher at Scoil Chrónáin Senior National School, Swords, Co. Dublin; PhD in Language Education from the School of Education, Trinity College

### Introduction

The most recent Chief Inspector's Report (Inspectorate, 2022) details ongoing concern about Irish-language teaching and learning in English-medium education (EME) at primary level. It identifies scope to improve the quality of pupils' learning in about one third of lessons, and it outlines the importance of fostering more engaging and enjoyable Irish-language learning experiences for students. It recommends increased focus on developing pupils' communication skills in Irish and the ability to transfer newly acquired language to different language scenarios.

In a broader sense, the lack of interactive contact with Irish for children in EME primary schools presents a key challenge. To extend Irish-language engagement beyond the classroom, for children attending either English-medium (Harris & Murtagh, 1999; Fleming & Debski, 2007) or Irish-immersion primary schools (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, 2019), it is necessary to establish and sustain functional contexts for the use of Irish outside the school. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or partial immersion has been recommended at various junctures for Irish at EME primary schools (De Spáinn, 2016; Harris, 2008).

### Is Tusa an Múinteoir project

The *Is Tusa an Múinteoir* (You Are the Teacher) project is a teacher-researcher study that aims to create meaningful domains of use for learners of Irish as an Additional Language at English-medium primary level. It is informed by sociocultural theory focusing on the social dimension of learning in the classroom and at home. Pupils are supported to act as tutors of Irish to their peers in school-based Irish lessons, and later as tutors to their parents at home.

Through a series of action cycles over the course of a school year, Irish-language tutoring and technology-mediated Irish-language learning were piloted. Twenty children in Fourth Class in a coeducational DEIS school, and their parents, participated in the

study in partnership with the teacher–researcher. A reconnaissance cycle explored learners' experience of and attitudes towards the language, which informed a provisional project action plan. Tutoring began with reciprocal peer tutoring (PT) during Irish lessons, twice a week for 12 weeks.

Children's engagement with class-wide reciprocal PT during the first school term developed their skills as tutors and learners, which were used in the second term when undertaking Irish-language student–parent tutoring (SPT). Here, children taught their parents an Irish lesson once a week for seven weeks, and children and parents contributed to a weekly lesson evaluation. More than half of the participating families took part in a second cycle of SPT in the final term.

**“ Children taught their parents an Irish lesson once a week for seven weeks, and children and parents contributed to a weekly lesson evaluation. ”**

In addition to tutoring, technology-mediated language learning (TMLL) for Irish was piloted as part of the project. Children and parents engaged with a class online learning zone (COLZ) dedicated to Irish-language activities and a class Twitter account curated by the teacher–researcher to support class composition of Irish-language tweets. The participatory action research methodology supported child and parent voice, engagement, and agency. The project culminated with a group of children and parents sharing the emerging findings of the study at an educational conference.

### In-class peer tutoring

The project sought to explore children's experience with the language in the daily Irish lesson as a point of departure, before developing other domains of use. The participating class identified Irish lessons as boring, with an overemphasis on textbook engagement and writing activities. Peer tutoring, an approach informed by sociocultural theory, sought to develop the child's role both as learner (*tutee*) and as *more knowledgeable other* (tutor).

The project title, *Is Tusa an Múinteoir*, acknowledged the significance of the child's role as tutor and their untapped capacity and agency as Irish-language learners in the communicative phase of the Irish lesson. The pre-communicative phase focussed on the teaching and learning of dedicated Irish-language structures and vocabulary to enable engagement with the peer-tutoring phase.

After each PT lesson, children reflected on their learning and how their partner helped them during tutoring. These evaluations (384 responses) showed a range of peer-mediated assistance by tutors: mainly explanation, demonstration, and practice, coupled with evidence of higher-order peer mediation such as coaching (Yarrow & Topping, 2001). The table below

shows examples of children's reflections on peer assistance received during peer tutoring.

| <b>Type of Peer-Mediated Assistance</b> | <b>Child's Reflection</b>   |
|---|---|
|   | <i>My partner helped me by:</i>   |
| 1. Explanation                          | <i>Explaining what to do in activity</i>  |
| 2. Demonstration                        | <i>Spelling something on the whiteboard</i>   |
| 3. Practice                             | <i>In pairs we described different uniforms and shared them on board</i>              |
| 4. Coaching                             | <i>I was saying the wrong word and my partner helped me figure out the right word</i> |

The teacher-researcher's ongoing review of the communicative phase of PT lessons showed the importance of high-quality Irish-language input in the lesson to equip learners to trial and extend their use of new and emerging Irish-language structures, and to develop their proficiency more generally in order to converse with their fellow students in Irish *around* the specific language activity. Peer tutoring enabled the children to develop tutoring skills, engage more actively with Irish, and build language awareness, all of which contributed to the smooth progression to student-parent tutoring of Irish in the home in the next phase of the project.

**Results indicated that children were positively disposed towards peer tutoring, with most of the class recommending an increase of 2-3 peer tutoring lessons a week.**

The results indicated that children were positively disposed towards peer tutoring, with most of the class recommending an increase of two to three PT lessons a week. Children's use of Irish increased over the course of the project across various domains, and most felt that their Irish competence had improved. The participatory action research methodology emerged as a crucial element, providing a mechanism for learners to both share their learning experiences and be part of the design and research.

### Reflections to inform practice

The following reflections are drawn from the review of the PT phase and seek to help Irish-language practitioners in English-medium primary schools.

- While we are all aware of children's general lack of opportunity to speak Irish outside of class, a good place to start is the *Irish lesson itself* in order to (re)ignite student interest and engagement.
- Surveying or interviewing children and parents at the outset is a great way to tell them your teaching plans and engage learners in the language-learning journey.
- Rich and planned input in the pre-communicative phase is essential. What is the lesson objective? What should children be able to achieve by the end of the lesson? What Irish-language structures and vocabulary are required? How can these be taught and learned interactively in the pre-communicative phase? What resources are required for peer tutoring?

- Teachers' video review of selected tutor–tutee engagements during the communicative phase can further inform teaching or the subsequent lesson.
- Children were readily able to identify how their partner had supported their learning. Encourage this via written or oral lesson evaluation.
- The lesson evaluation enabled children to develop their language awareness. This was done through a mixture of Irish and English. While the target language is recommended, children's capacity to do this *as Gaeilge* must be built up by equipping children with the requisite language over a sustained period.
- Development of the child as the more knowledgeable other with peers is key to developing their confidence and self-assessed ability in the language.

## Conclusion

The *Is Tusa an Múinteoir* project shows the potential of peer tutoring and other pedagogical approaches to support Irish-language engagement. On a practical level, peer tutoring is an adaptable and sustainable approach that could be implemented in a variety of class levels in any primary school context.

How can teachers be supported in bringing such projects to school, local, and national level? Incremental development of *communities of practice* is recommended, whereby teachers and schools develop and share innovative practice in Irish-language teaching and learning. What could also be explored is the development of communities of practice whereby Irish-language educators in English-medium and Irish-medium settings could collaborate on shared goals for mutual pedagogical and linguistic benefit.

---

## REFERENCES:

- De Spáinn, J. (2016) 'A vision for the Irish language: Transforming the teaching of Irish and other languages'. In B. Mooney (Ed.), *Education Matters Yearbook 2016–2017* (pp. 33–37). Dublin: Education Matters.
- Fleming, A. and Debski, R. (2007) 'The use of Irish in networked communications: A study of schoolchildren in different language settings', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 28(2), 85–101. DOI: 10.2167/jmmd455.1
- Harris, J. (2008) 'The declining role of primary schools in the revitalisation of Irish', *AILA Review*, 21(1), 49–68. DOI: 10.1075/aila.21.05har
- Harris, J. and Murtagh, L. (1999) *Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School: A Review of Research and Development*. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann.
- Inspectorate (2022) *Chief Inspector's Report, September 2016 – December 2020*. Department of Education. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Ó Duibhir, P. and Ní Thuairisg, L. (2019) 'Young immersion learners' language use outside the classroom in a minority language context', *AILA Review*, 32(1), 112–137. DOI: 10.1075/aila.00023.dui
- Yarrow, F. and Topping, K.J. (2001) 'Collaborative writing: The effects of metacognitive prompting and structured peer interaction', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71(2), 261–282. DOI: 10.1348/000709901158514
-