

The Potential of Small-Group Parallel Instruction for EAL Support Provision in Primary Schools

Lessons from the Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal Programme

This article unpacks the potential of using a small-group parallel instruction model for English as an additional language in Irish primary schools. Drawing on doctoral research findings in the 'Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal' programme, it outlines current approaches to collaborative (co-)teaching, charts participants' responses to the small-group parallel instructional model, and proposes future action for policy and practice.

Introduction

The launch of the Primary Curriculum Framework, Free Schoolbooks Scheme, and Revised Mathematics Curriculum represent some of the major milestones charted in the Irish primary education system in 2023. Such new advances prompt critical reflection on former developments in the primary education sector, two of which underpin the foundations for this article: the integrated Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2015; DES, 2019), and the revised Special Education Teaching Allocation (DES, 2017). Lessons from these changes in education are fundamental to the trajectory of any newly introduced approaches in Ireland.

Markedly different from its predecessor, the Primary Language Curriculum integrates considerations for the teaching of English, Irish, and alternative home languages. Transferability of knowledge, skills, and concepts is a central tenet of its conceptualisation, which exemplifies the key role of collaboration within and across languages in education.



Dr Aoife Merrins

Primary school teacher at Scoil Mhichíl Naofa, Athy, and PhD graduate of the Institute of Education, Dublin City University



**An tOllamh
Pádraig Ó Duibhir**

Institute of Education, Dublin City University



Gillian Lake

Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

This unified approach to language instruction is mirrored in the Special Education Teaching Allocation, which gives primary school leaders the autonomy to manage and deploy support personnel for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) or English as an additional language (EAL), based on such learners' individual learning needs. As such, educators are invited to proceed with co-teaching practices, like 'team-teaching and small-group teaching' (DES, 2017, p.18), which raises the matter of current co-teaching practices in the Irish context.

Collaborative (co-)teaching in an Irish context

Co-teaching emphasises the role of teachers as collaborative agents to support learning in the mainstream classroom, with an emphasis on sharing expertise, decision-making, lesson delivery, and assessment (Tasdemir & Yildirim, 2017). Co-teaching models evident in Irish primary classrooms include station teaching, team teaching, and small-group parallel instruction.

Station teaching, a well-documented co-teaching approach in Irish primary schools (Daly, 2015; Merrins et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2020), occurs when students are put into three or more groups and rotate to different teacher-led learning centres in the classroom. Team teaching involves two teachers teaching in the same classroom at the same time; it has limited reported evidence in practice at primary level (Vahey, 2013), yet it shows promise for educating post-primary students (Ó Murchú & Conway, 2017). Small-group parallel instruction involves three or more teachers working together in a classroom to teach the same content to their own assigned group for a set amount of time. As with team teaching, there is only one known study of this approach in Irish primary education (Merrins & Lake, 2020).

All primary schools in Ireland were obliged to refrain from co-teaching models between 2020 and 2021 to help control the spread of Covid-19. This reduction of co-teaching models was very apparent in the 'Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal' study.

About Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal

The Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal programme was designed, developed, and delivered as part of a qualitative PhD study (Merrins, 2023), providing a child-centred, interactive, and engaging language-learning experience for infant primary pupils to improve their oral narrative retell skills. It adopts daily dialogic shared reading of six weekly traditional tales in English and three fortnightly traditional tales in Irish (Figure 1), gradually encouraging learners to retell the narrative for their group and partner over the course of the week.

Markedly different from its predecessor, the Primary Language Curriculum integrates considerations for the teaching of English, Irish, and alternative home languages.

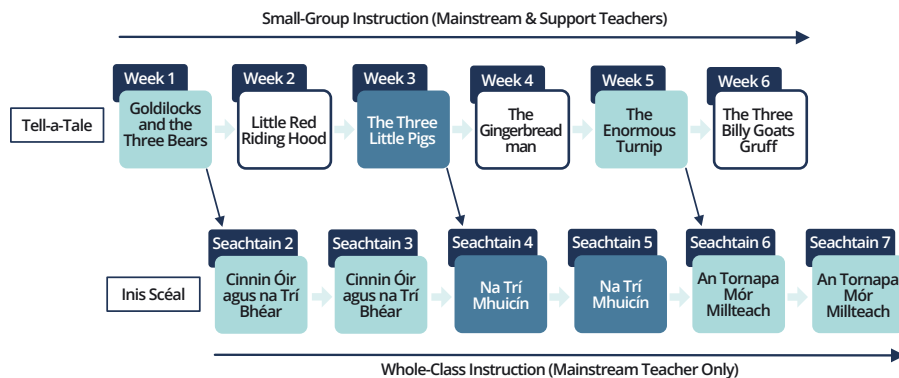


Figure 1: Programme overview

Tell-a-Tale is delivered through small-group parallel instruction by mainstream and support teachers, while Inis Scéal is delivered independently by the mainstream teacher using whole class instruction. Though they differ in their instructional approaches, they share similarities by occurring within the mainstream classroom over a six-week period, by reading the same content in English and Irish, and by using the same resources to support the development of vocabulary, grammar, phonological awareness, and comprehension skills in both English and Irish.

Participant responses to small-group parallel instruction

The study elicited teachers' and pupils' experiences of programme participation. The current article focuses on the thematic analyses of participants' experiences of small-group parallel instruction.

A sample of 20 teacher participants engaged in focus group discussions before, during, and after programme implementation. These conversations charted initial teacher preference for, and extensive experience with, station teaching; all participants reported having never used small-group parallel instruction as a co-teaching model.

Critical reflection revealed that initial teacher education experiences had emphasised solo rather than collaborative teaching models, with the latter being learned 'on the job' after graduation. As with embracing any new initiative, there was some initial hesitation to adopting this approach. Nonetheless, teachers reported their enjoyment of certain factors associated with this method during and after programme delivery:

- » the development of teacher–learner relationships over a sustained period of daily instructional time
- » the ability to monitor and scaffold progress from one lesson to the next

- › the opportunities for meaningful differentiation as and when the needs arose.

Two-thirds of the participant pupil sample (n = 110) emphasised the importance of social interaction in their small-group learning experiences. They expressed a special interest in the opportunity to work with their peers. Friendship, collaboration, play, and conversation were important catalysts for this preference. Thus, small-group learning that enables learner-centric social encounters has wide-ranging functions to support social learning experiences.

Reflections for policy and practice

These findings inform the following recommendations for policy and practice:

Policymakers are encouraged to ensure:

- › continued autonomy for schools in the deployment of support personnel for the provision of additional support in SEN and/or EAL
- › publication of guidelines for teachers to adopt small-group parallel instruction in mainstream classrooms (applicable to both literacy and numeracy)
- › the introduction of an array of co-teaching models in initial teacher education, and to provide opportunities for student teachers to implement these co-teaching approaches during their placements.

Practitioners are invited to adopt:

- › multiple methods of in-class co-teaching to avoid over-use of station teaching
- › peer tutoring within small-group parallel instructional approaches
- › playful learning experiences that enable conversation, collaboration, and friendship formation in junior primary classrooms.

Conclusion

It is evident from this research that small-group parallel instruction may be an underused yet promising approach to teaching language in infant primary classrooms. Despite initial hesitation with this model, practitioners recognised its value for classroom relations, learners' academic progression, and effective differentiation. The interpersonal learning experiences that it enabled were important to many of the pupils, and raise questions for all to consider the social opportunities that prevail within and across the language curriculum.

Ireland's primary education system is once again on the cusp of curriculum reform, and co-teaching approaches, like the small-group parallel instruction

It is evident from this research that small-group parallel instruction may be an underused yet promising approach to teaching language in infant primary classrooms.

model, can greatly assist with embracing this change. This article invites policymakers and practitioners to embrace such approaches to create innovative, collaborative, and effective systems in education.

REFERENCES

- Daly, D. (2015) 'The implementation of a literacy intervention "Station Teaching" in infant classes in Irish primary schools'. Doctoral dissertation, University College Cork.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) *Circular to the Management Authorities of all Mainstream Primary Schools: Special Education Teaching Allocation*. Dublin: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) *Integrated Primary Language Curriculum*. Dublin: Government publications.
- Merrins, A. (2023) 'Exploring the design, development and delivery of a bilingual English-Irish oral narrative programme in linguistically diverse junior primary classrooms'. Doctoral dissertation, Dublin City University.
- Merrins, A. and Lake, G. (2020) 'A tale of two halves: Collaboratively supporting children with English as an additional language (EAL)', *ILSA Autumn Newsletter*, pp. 7–12.
- Merrins, A., Kazmierczak-Murray, S., and Perkins, R. (2019) 'Using collaborative teaching and storybooks in linguistically diverse junior infant classrooms to increase pupils' contributions to story-time discussions', *Irish Teachers Journal*, 7(1), 91–112.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2015) *Primary Language Curriculum*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- O'Connell, E. (2020) 'Teachers' perspectives of station-teaching in Mathematics in an Irish primary school', *Student Teacher Educational Research e-Journal*, 3, 45–53.
- Ó Murchú, F. and Conway, P. (2017) '(Re)positioning team teaching: The visibility and viability of learning in classrooms', *Education Research and Perspectives*, 44, 43–69.
- Tasdemir, H. and Yildirim, T. (2017) 'Collaborative teaching from English language instructors' perspectives', *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(2), 632–642.
- Vahey, T.M. (2013) 'Differentiated spelling instruction using co-teaching', *Learn*, 35, 48–58.