

Irish and Modern Foreign Languages: Third Wheels or Central Cogs for Language Learning?

Primary school children in Ireland are now formally exposed to a minimum of three languages in Senior Cycle, and many also speak another language at home. This article offers a timely account of theoretical considerations for third-language learning and outlines their practical implications for any policy and practice that aims to support plurilingual competence in Irish primary schools.



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Primary school children in Ireland are now formally exposed to a minimum of three languages in Senior Cycle: English, Irish, and a modern foreign language (MFL). Almost one in ten also speaks another language at home, according to the Central Statistics Office in 2024, highlighting the potential for exposure to four or more languages for some pupils. This short article offers a timely account of theoretical considerations for third-language (L3) learning and outlines their practical implications for any policy and practice that aims to support plurilingual competence in Irish primary schools.

Theoretical views on third-language acquisition (TLA) recognise that previously acquired languages (L1, L2) have a cumulative or consolidation effect when learning an L3, or emphasise that an L2 plays the strongest role for L3 learning (see figure).

Cumulative enhancement model	L2 status factor hypothesis	Typological primacy model
All previously learnt languages may influence the development of subsequently acquired ones (Flynn et al., 2004)	TLA is strongly affected by L2 during many stages of L3 learning (Bardel & Falk, 2007)	TLA is affected by the similarity of previously acquired languages (L1, L2) to new language (L3) (Rothman, 2011)

Third-language acquisition theories

Each view varies, but there is consistent emphasis that an L3 is a central cog for language learning, because it can

support learners in identifying and using skills from previously acquired languages. Third-language acquisition occurs in Irish primary classrooms with the teaching of an MFL to native-English speakers (L1: English; L2: Irish), and of Irish to English-as-an-additional-language speakers (L1: language other than English or Irish; L2: English).

L3 learning brings many benefits, including more experience and success with language learning compared with monolingual peers, as L3 learners have broader linguistic repertoires, stronger metalinguistic awareness, wider-ranging content for cross-linguistic transfer, and more strategic learning approaches (Cenoz, 2013; Jaensch, 2013). Thus, teaching and learning MFL and Irish in linguistically diverse classrooms are further supported as central cogs for language learning.

These findings inform the following recommendations for policy and practice:

Policymakers are encouraged to ensure:

- » teacher professional development opportunities for L3 teaching and learning
- » opportunities for TLA beyond the classroom (e.g., funding for student immersion in Irish-medium/MFL environment for L3 consolidation).

Practitioners are invited to adopt:

- » integrated language-teaching practices (use all languages as learning capital)
- » strengths-based approach to peer tutoring – native-English speaker as lead peer tutor for English-language lessons; EAL speaker as lead peer tutor for Irish-language lessons.

Third-language acquisition is an undeniable strength in language learning classrooms. It is important that policy and practice draw on the theories and benefits of this phenomenon for the benefit of all children in their classrooms.

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