Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?

Marino Institute of Education

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Word Count: 10, 992

Supervisor: Emma Ní Mhaoilstéighe

Submission Date: 09/05/2022

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that there is a positive correlation between bilingualism and additional language acquisition. While studies have addressed Gaelscoileanna and additional language acquisition separately, the researcher believes that the connection between these two fields has not yet been fully developed or rendered explicit. The purpose of this research was to explore the extent to which attending a Gaelscoil impacts ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning. The author of this study was curious to ascertain if being a past pupil of a Gaelscoil influences one's decision to study languages at third level. A small-scale qualitative study was undertaken, positioning itself within the interpretive worldview. Eight Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level were interviewed and their experiences of early immersion in the Irish language and additional language acquisition are described in rich verbal reports.

This research revealed that there are a number of elements at play which influence ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning. These include the advantages of bilingualism, the ease of acquiring an additional language, the role of parents in influencing motivation to learn languages, attitude towards the Irish language, language and culture, and early immersion in the Irish language. Furthermore, the findings shed light on improving practice when promoting cultural and language awareness through the implementation of the *Primary Language Curriculum*. Several recommendations are put forth for future research related to the nexus between Irish medium education and additional language acquisition, such as gender and language learning, DEIS Gaelscoileanna, curriculum reform, policy, pedagogical practice, the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030, and international relevance.

It is the researcher's hope that this study may contribute to developing further knowledge surrounding the benefits of immersing children in a second language at an early age. The author of this study believes this will positively impact ability to acquire additional languages and attitude towards language learning throughout life.

Dedication

For my Granny Freda

I dedicated my undergraduate dissertation to Grandad John, but this one is for you. I hope the pair of you are up there, giving our lovely dog Sam plenty of Rich Tea biscuits and looking out for us all.

~ Lán dóchais agus grá ~

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Emma Ní Mhaoilstéighe, for your continuous support throughout the entirety of my dissertation. I really appreciate all of your expertise, guidance, and patience. You constantly provided me with in-depth and insightful feedback on all of my various drafts and redrafts. Your enthusiasm and passion for our mutual area of interest – language learning is inspiring. Your words of wisdom were so encouraging each and every time I embarked on another step of the research process. Your supervision and assistance has significantly improved the final quality of my work, and for this, I am truly grateful. Thank you for the plethora of relevant and thought-provoking articles and studies you sent my way. As I reach the end of this research project, I regret that I did not have sufficient time to peruse all of the material you shared with me. Perhaps, one day, I will have the opportunity to return to it for a PhD…you never know!

In addition, I would like to thank our research methods lecturer, Clíodhna Martin, who furnished our PME cohort with the knowledge and skills to write our dissertations. I found completing a module on research methods and submitting our research proposals in the first year of the course extremely beneficial. You were always so reassuring and supportive during all of the extra Zoom sessions you offered us.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the participants in the study, without whom, this research would not have been possible. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules for our interviews, and for generously and openly sharing your experiences of Gaelscoileanna and additional language acquisition with me.

To my fairy godmother, Ella Bella, your weekly Friday evening visits amidst countless lockdowns and losing our favourite furry friends, were constant reminders of the passing of time and that I was getting closer and closer to the finish line. A huge thank you

for all of your warm wishes in the form of beautiful cards and emoji-filled WhatsApp messages!

Furthermore, I wish to thank my friend Caitlín, who made my first pilot interview incredibly enjoyable and helped to put me at my ease in advance of the data collection process. Our long walks and endless chats, accompanied by delicious food, always brighten my days and lift my spirits.

It is important to thank Stefan for his unwavering kindness and unfailing reassurance throughout my master's degree. Your gentle presence keeps me calm and comforts me in my times of need. Wishing you all the very best of luck with your own postgraduate programme next year…I only hope I am as helpful and understanding as you were to me!

With both of my parents completing their own master's research in the last six years, I really was spoilt for choice in terms of who to pester for advice! To my dad, for lending me his impressive collection of research methods texts, for regularly offering to assist me with formatting and proofreading, and for his eagerness to bring his editorial lens to the table. To my mam, a fellow educator and dear friend, our summer evening strolls nudged me gently towards the end of this journey.

~ Buíochas ó Chroí ~

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviations

L1:	First Language
L2:	Second Language
L3:	Third Language
L4:	Fourth Language
L5:	Fifth Language
LX:	Target Language
SLA:	Second Language Acquisition
TA:	Thematic Analysis
TLA:	Third Language Acquisition

Acronyms

BERA:	British Educational Research Association
CELTA:	Certificate of English Language Teaching to Speakers of Other Languages
CEFR:	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CPD:	Continuing Professional Development
DEIS:	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Strategy
NCCA:	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
PLC:	Primary Language Curriculum
SERC:	Student Ethics in Research Committee

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Chapter 1 ~ Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Research

López-Alvarado (2017) contends that the purpose of educational research is to improve educational practice by analysing the world of education. The purpose of this research is to consider the link between attending a Gaelscoil [a primary Irish immersion school] and ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning. Cenoz (2003) defines third language acquisition (TLA) as "the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages. The acquisition of the first two languages can be simultaneous (as in early bilingualism) or consecutive" (p. 71). This study is significant because although research exists in relation to Gaelscoileanna and TLA discretely, the author of this study has found little data which connects these two fields.

1.2 Research Rationale and Context

My motivation for this research is as follows: I attended a Gaelscoil. In my English-speaking secondary school, I developed a positive attitude towards language learning. If I contemplate my own language learning, my first language (L1) was English, a Germanic language. At the age of five, I started learning Irish, a Celtic language. When I began secondary school, I commenced my studies of French, a Romance language. I hope to learn Italian, another Romance language. With reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), my English is proficient (C2), my Irish is advanced (C1), my French is upper intermediate (B2), and my Italian is beginner (A0). I anticipate that acquiring Italian will be easier having already achieved a high level of proficiency of French. My personal experience of language acquisition will assist me in assimilating relevant theories, thus

making meaningful connections between previous studies and my own research question: *Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?*

My undergraduate degree is in English Literature and French. I completed the Certificate of English Language Teaching to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) course, before working as an English language teacher. I have taught English to teenagers and adults of various nationalities, from elementary to proficient level. I believe this professional practice will prove advantageous to me, as it has presented me with practical experience of progressing language learners' receptive and productive skills. Some of my friends have followed a similar scholarly path to my own, thus sparking an interest in this area of additional language acquisition. My Level 8 studies in languages will benefit me, as I will be capable of applying my knowledge to practice. This in turn will make me a better educator.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of this dissertation is to investigate the effect that attending a Gaelscoil has on additional language acquisition, at post-primary, in third level education, and throughout life. Not all pupils of Gaelscoileanna have equal proficiency in both languages (English and Irish). This study explores the perceptions of Gaelscoil alumni regarding the possible correlation between attending a Gaelscoil and attitude towards language learning. Another objective is to identify whether attending a Gaelscoil influences one's decision to study languages at third level. Cenoz (2003) suggests that:

> Third language acquisition shares many characteristics with second language acquisition but it also presents differences because third language learners have more language experience at their disposal as second language learners, are influenced by

> the general effects of bilingualism on cognition, and have access to two linguistic systems when acquiring a third language. (p. 71)

It is beneficial to ascertain the effects that immersing children in a second language (L2) at an early age has on their ability to acquire more languages. Similar studies have been carried out in bilingual communities in Canada, the Basque Country, and Catalonia (Cenoz, 2013), hence the need for research within an Irish context.

1.4 Research Design Overview

A qualitative design was implemented. A literature review and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The research approach will be outlined in Chapter 3.

1.5 Ethics

Ethical consideration is crucial, as it pertains to the ideological values concerning research on humans. It entails researchers upholding a satisfactory level of respect for the people, data, democratic values, research quality, and academic freedom involved in the research process (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). Ethical approval was granted by the Student Ethics in Research Committee (SERC) in Marino Institute of Education. The BERA (2018) guidelines were followed throughout the process and participants were informed of their right to voluntary informed consent, their right to withdraw, and their right to anonymity. Further details relating to ethical considerations will be addressed in Chapter 3.

I maintain that my early immersion in the Irish language helped me immensely in language learning, and that it is partially responsible for my positive attitude towards languages. However, I acknowledge that this may not be the case for everyone, and I will strive to be cognisant of personal bias. I will mediate for this by searching for negative cases and using peer debriefing.

1.6 Dissertation Outline

Chapter 1 is an introductory chapter and outlines the overall context of the study. The aims and objectives are stated and explained. Chapter 2 examines relevant research and comprises the main themes identified throughout the literature review. Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach, providing an overview of the research design and the ethical considerations. It delineates the stages where data was gathered, interpreted, and analysed. The findings and analysis of the data are uncovered in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, which summarises the findings. Recommendations for future practice and research are made.

Chapter 2 ~ Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A range of Irish and international research on relevant themes such as additional language acquisition, bilingualism, critical periods for language learning, the Irish language, culture, attitude, and motivation is evaluated. Wilenski and DeMil (2020) note that: "Results from previous research indicate that bilinguals demonstrate greater success than monolinguals when learning a third language (Cenoz, 2003; Klein 2005; Sanz, 2000)" (p. 153). Cenoz (2003) corroborates Wilenski and DeMil's statement by postulating that: "studies on the effect of bilingualism on third language acquisition conducted in different contexts tend to associate bilingualism with advantages in third language acquisition" (p. 78). In light of the intended research to ask Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: *Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning*, these assertions, based on international research, predict that learning Irish as a second language will give rise to successful acquisition of additional languages.

2.2 Additional Language Acquisition

The first aspect of this literature review addresses additional language acquisition. Wilenski and DeMil (2020) "hypothesized that based on the similarity to the language being learned, the learner would rely on either the first or the second language. Results demonstrate that language type influenced learners' third language acquisition" (p. 159). Wilenski and DeMil (2020) make reference to Rothman (2010) to aid their explanation of language type:

> Language similarities are evident in languages that share a proto-language. Languages such as Spanish, Italian, and French (and others) are typically grouped together as Romance languages as they derive from Latin, whereas English and German (and

> others) are considered Germanic language as they derive from protogermanic. (p. 154)

Carvalho and Bacelar da Silva (2006) confirm that "linguistic similarity between the languages overrides order of acquisition" (p. 185). This shows that typological relatedness between languages matters more than whether it was the learner's L1 or L2. Carvalho and Bacelar da Silva (2006) continue: "Although cross-linguistic influence has been widely discussed and investigated in the field of second language (L2) learning, its role in third language (L3) acquisition still remains relatively unexplored" (p. 185). Here, they pinpoint a gap in the area of TLA. This researcher's interview schedule comprises the following questions: "Are there similarities between the Irish language and the language you chose to study at third level?" and "To what extent do you believe language type plays a role in contributing to the ease at which we acquire a language?" It is hoped that this dissertation will examine the role of cross-linguistic influence in TLA. Wilenski and DeMil's 2020 study, in addition to Carvalho and Baclar da Silva's 2006 research, evince the significance of language type when acquiring additional languages.

Cenoz (2013) claims that: "Learners who have gone through the process of learning a second language are also more experienced language learners" (p. 72). She proceeds: "When multilingual speakers, who have gone through the process of acquiring an L3 (L4 or L5), reflect on how they acquire languages, they do explain that other languages are useful and that they are used as a basis" (Cenoz, 2013, p. 73). It can be contended that when learning a new language, it seems natural to use vocabulary from other languages to interpret the meaning of a new word. Rubin (1975) lends credence to this belief:

> The good language learner may be a good guesser, that is, he gathers and stores information in an efficient manner so it can be easily retrieved. He may listen to a

> phrase, pick out the words he understands and infer the rest. He may actively look for clues in the meaning – in the topic, setting, or attitudes of the speakers. (p. 43)

Rubin (1975) illustrates how the "good language learner" effectively employs previous related knowledge to make sense of any new information.

2.3 Bilingualism and Multilingualism

Having assessed relevant literature pertaining to additional language acquisition, this next section focusses on bilingualism and multilingualism. It is imperative to recognise that bilingualism "must be able to account for the presence of at least two languages within one and the same speaker, remembering that ability in these two languages may or may not be equal" (Baetens Beardsmore, 1986, p. 3). This problematises the concept of balanced bilingualism or equilingualism, thus highlighting that ability and proficiency in L1, L2, and the target language (LX) may not always be equal. Cenoz (2013) affirms that: "learners are influenced by both their L1 and their L2 when learning an L3" (p. 72). This idea of L1 and L2 influencing TLA is related to the concept of additive bilingualism. Dillon (2011) defines additive bilingualism as "a situation where the L1 is valued and is not replaced by the L2", admitting that "they may even support each other" (p. 31). She pinpoints the co-existence of English and Irish in Ireland as an example of additive bilingualism (Dillon, 2011). Cenoz (2013) voices that "differences between second language acquisition (SLA) and TLA have been neglected in SLA research and in studies on bilingualism" (p. 71), thus identifying a pertinent gap in this academic area. The intention of this research is to manipulate this lacuna by investigating if a connection exists between early immersion in the Irish language and language learning. Analysing the effect that bilingualism or prior linguistic knowledge has on TLA is of especial interest to this study.

2.4 Critical Periods for Language Learning

Following a discussion of the topic of bilingualism, the third part of this literature review concentrates on critical periods of language learning. Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) examine the critical period for language acquisition using evidence from second language learning, discovering that: "At least as far as second language acquisition is concerned, then, the conclusion must be drawn that a critical period extending from age 2 to age 12 does not exist" (p. 1225). Griffiths (2008) takes contrasting research findings into consideration such as "the younger people were when they started learning English the more native-like was their pronunciation" and "although younger learners are often more successful in the long run, adults may learn more quickly initially" (p. 35). Griffiths (2008) draws on the work of Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) to provide a rationale for the faster progress of adult language learners in the beginning: "older students are initially faster than younger students since they are capable of rationalizing the new language and of utilizing the patterns of their first language for immediate communicative purposes" (p. 40). While specific to English language learning, Roessingh's (2006) small-scale studies propose that "age 15-16 is a good age" (p. 95). Cowie (2008) contests the concepts of agency in language acquisition:

> Whereas the early model saw the child as a 'little scientist,' actively (if unconsciously) figuring out the rules of grammar, the new 'parameter-setting' model conceived language acquisition as a kind of growth or maturation; language acquisition is something that happens to you, not something you do. (p. 6)

Cowie's views invoke the myth of natural talent, questioning the innateness of linguaphilia. It will prove intriguing to explore the extent to which Gaelscoil alumni perceive TLA as something that happened to them or something they did.

2.5 The Irish Language

After reflecting upon critical periods for language learning, the following theme of this literature review centres upon the Irish language, including an analysis of immersion education in Gaelscoileanna. Immersion education, known in the Irish language as *tumoideachas* is always used in Gaelscoileanna, especially in the infant classes, to expose the children to *Gaeilge* [Irish] as early and as deeply as possible. Kennedy (2012) posits that "immersion also aims to strengthen children's languages and cultural identity, and is highly effective in developing bilingualism and biliteracy" (p. 23). Nic Fhlannchadha (2016) recognises that "there can be differences in the timing of bilingual acquisition, depending on variables such as amount of exposure and complexity of the specific feature" (pp. 11–12). Many Gaelscoil attendees, particularly those not living in Gaeltacht areas, do not speak *Gaeilge* at home as their L1. Thus, their main exposure to the Irish language occurs throughout the school day.

The *Primary Language Curriculum* (*PLC*) promotes that transfer of skills from one language to another, in this case from English to Irish or vice versa: "Languages by their nature are interconnected. There is an underlying conceptual understanding, or knowledge base, that is common across languages. This makes possible the transfer of concepts, literacy skills, and learning strategies from one language to another" (NCCA, 2019, p. 43). This linguistic interconnection thus implies that children acquire a L2 in a similar way to the acquisition of L1, and that interaction with others is of paramount importance in order to communicate their needs (NCCA, 2019). The *PLC* affirms a focus on the transfer of skills between languages in primary education: "A focus on transfer of skills enables children to make connections between languages and develop an awareness of how languages work" (NCCA, 2019, p. 43). Such a focus would foster language awareness, subsequently leading to successful additional language acquisition and a positive attitude towards language learning.

2.6 Culture, Attitude, and Motivation

2.6.1 Culture

Following an exploration of literature concerned with the Irish language, this final section encompasses significant factors such as culture, attitude, and motivation. Bavin (1995) draws attention to the importance of culture in language acquisition: "Thus we need to consider not only the acquisition of structurally different languages but also the cultural systems in which they are acquired, in order to further our knowledge about the acquisition process" (p. 392). Boroditsky (2011) comments on "the great diversity of languages that have emerged around the globe" by arguing that:

> Each [language] provides its own cognitive toolkit and encapsulates the knowledge and worldview developed over thousands of years within a culture. Each contains a way of perceiving, categorizing and making meaning in the world, an invaluable guidebook developed and honed by our ancestors. (p. 65)

Boroditsky's 2011 claim suggests that previously acquired languages can alter the learner's worldview, as well as helping to assimilate meaning. Del-Olmo-Ibáñez and Díez Mediavilla (2016) postulate that: "To learn a second language also means being able to recognise the culture of its speakers, its communicative uses, its expressive modalities and procedural richness" (p. 59). This standpoint can be linked to the attitude of both Bavin (1995) and Boroditsky (2011) regarding the presence of culture in language acquisition.

The *PLC* in Ireland asserts that: "When a child can actively engage to some extent with the culture associated with a language, their interest in the language is reinforced" (NCCA, 2019, p. 39). While referring to the work of Gardner (1985), Cheung and Dörnyei (2007) uphold that: "language learners' dispositions towards the target culture and its people have a considerable influence on their learning achievement" (p. 163). It is not only interest in the language, which will be augmented by active engagement with the surrounding culture,

as put forward by the *PLC*. This cultural awareness will also result in increased success in language learning. In the context of language awareness and cultural awareness, the *PLC* advocates that: "It is important that children have opportunities to increase their awareness of Irish culture" (NCCA, 2019, p. 39). Prior to this literature review, the place of cultural systems had not been considered in relation to this research.

2.6.2 Attitude

Naiman et al. (1978) maintain that "aptitude was less of a crucial factor than attitude to learning, persistence and willingness to adapt to varied learning situations over prolonged periods of time" (p. 217). Cheung and Dörnyei (2007) reference the active research domain of "*group dynamics"* in social psychology, which "focuses on how the group's collective behaviour influences its members' development of beliefs and action" (p. 163). One of the researcher's interview questions is: "How did you find the oral language classes in your undergraduate programme?" It is anticipated that this will allow participants to discuss group dynamics of language classes in university, and evaluate the influence they had on their beliefs and action. Through her mixed methods investigation of parental involvement in Irish immersion primary education, Kavanagh (2013) attests that "Parents can also influence their child's educational outcomes by reinforcing aspects of their child's school learning" (p. 20). The interview schedule for this dissertation includes the following question: "To what extent did your parents influence your motivation to learn languages?" It will prove insightful to reflect upon Kavanagh's view in light of this research, and to determine if the parenting technique of positive reinforcement played a role in motivating Gaelscoil alumni to pursue studies in languages at third level.

2.6.3 Motivation

Cheung and Dörnyei (2007) argue that: “Motivation serves as the initial engine to generate learning and later functions as an ongoing driving force that helps to sustain the long and usually laborious journey of acquiring a foreign language” (p. 153). Thus, they identify motivation as a key factor in fruitful language acquisition. They acknowledge that “from the teacher’s viewpoint, presenting a personal role model is perhaps the most powerful and influential tool in motivating their students” (Cheung & Dörnyei, 2007, p. 161). In an Irish context, it is possible to dissect this contention with regard to the teaching of *Gaeilge* in primary education. In the *Chief Inspector's Report September 2016-December 2020: Excellence in Learning for all*, “it was noted that there was insufficient opportunity for children to communicate through Irish and to develop their language skills in meaningful communicative contexts” (An Roinn Oideachais, 2020, p. 115). It grows obvious that many primary school teachers lack confidence in their competence and proficiency in the Irish language, which results in a failure to generate freer practice activities, which would ameliorate children’s productive skills in the language. The Chief Inspector of the Department of Education posits that: “There remains considerable scope to develop pupils’ learning outcomes, motivation and engagement in Irish in English-medium schools” (An Roinn Oideachais, 2020, p. 124), thus recognising the predominance of a negative attitude towards *Gaeilge* found among children across the nation.

While the role of the teacher in extrinsic motivation is undeniable, the efforts and work ethic displayed by the pupil must be realised too, listed by Cheung and Dörnyei (2007) as “the importance of the students’ effortful engagement in the learning process” (p. 162). Cheung and Dörnyei (2007) favour the promotion of self-confidence among learners, as they indicate that: “the way students perceive or judge their own ability has a significant effect on the effort they are willing to devote to completing a task” (p. 162). This stance can be

connected to the earlier citation from Naiman et. al., which directly relates aptitude to attitude. What is suggested here is that pupil perceptions or judgements surrounding their individual ability is markedly influential. What is not specified, however, is whether this constitutes a positive or negative influence.

The next motivational strategy in language instruction, as recommended by Cheung and Dörnyei (2007), is the creation of a warm atmosphere, whereby students feel at ease in the classroom. They express that "language learning anxiety created by a tense classroom climate is a powerful negative factor that hinders students' learning motivation and achievement" (Cheung & Dörnyei, 2007, p. 162). Furthermore, reference is made to the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) on self-determination theory, which emphasised that "an autonomy-supporting environment leads to intrinsic motivation" (Cheung & Dörnyei, 2007, p. 164). The advocacy of risk-taking and the discouragement of social comparison will engender a classroom climate which supports the independence of each individual learner (Cheung & Dörnyei, 2007). When this autonomy is supported, even celebrated, the language learning pupil will no longer rely as heavily on external sources for motivation. Rather, this will come from within.

In both Taiwanese and previous Hungarian studies (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998), it was revealed that "motivational principles such as 'displaying motivating teacher behaviour', 'promoting learners' self-confidence', 'creating a pleasant classroom climate' and presenting tasks properly' were in the top five positions in both studies" (Cheung & Dörnyei, 2007, p. 169). These results prompted Cheung and Dörnyei (2007) to conclude that "some motivational strategies are transferable across diverse cultural and ethnolinguistic contexts" (p. 171). If these motivational strategies are viewed as educationally relevant in both Hungarian and Taiwanese contexts, this would indicate that the same is true for an Irish

context, either with the teaching of *Gaeilge* in primary and secondary education, or through the teaching of international languages across third level settings.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review analysed a range of Irish and international research on pivotal themes relating to the research question of this study, including additional language acquisition, bilingualism and multilingualism, critical periods for language learning, the Irish language, culture, attitude, and motivation. In conclusion, not everyone accepts the positive influence of L1 and L2 on TLA. Wilenski and DeMil (2020) refer to the viewpoint of Odlin (2003) that "it is very difficult to narrow down the most influential factor in TLA and that there is not sufficient evidence to decide which factors are more or less influential" (p. 153). Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) reveal that: "It is entirely possible that such individual differences in the patterning of language abilities are also present in one's first language" (p. 1126). With respect to these arguments, it becomes apparent that there can be a multitude of influences on an individual as they are in the process of acquiring an additional language, and the hope of this research is to discern whether attending a Gaelscoil is among them.

Chapter 3 ~ Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research approach of this study. A qualitative method was selected to explore the perspectives of participants in relation to the possible impact of attending a Gaelscoil on additional language acquisition and attitude towards language learning. Each stage of the research process is discussed, including the research approach and design, sampling strategy, and data collection and analysis. The rationale for the research approach and choice of design is considered in relation to the research question: *Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?* The ethical implications and the role of the researcher are delineated. Lastly, the limitations and efforts to mitigate their effect are presented.

3.2 Research Approach

3.2.1 Qualitative Design

The rationale for the research approach and choice of design was considered in relation to the research question. A qualitative design was implemented. Semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes were conducted, which began with some predetermined questions, and then allowed the interview to evolve: "Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured" (Creswell, 2003, p. 20). It is attested that qualitative interviews "afford researchers opportunities to explore, in an in-depth manner, matters that are unique to the experiences of the interviewees, allowing insights into how different phenomena of interest are experienced and perceived" (McGrath et al., 2018, p. 1002). This procedure of empirical data collection enabled the researcher to interpret the data, and to form thematic ideas around

the possible connection between attending a Gaelscoil and additional language acquisition. Wellington (2015) affirms that: “interviewing allows a researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe. We can probe an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives” (p. 73).

Qualitative research is subjective, interpretative, and descriptive by nature. Therefore, this research adopted an interpretivist approach. Interpretive research can be defined as “a research paradigm that is based on the assumption that social reality is not singular or objective, but is rather shaped by human experiences and social contexts” ("Chapter 12 Interpretive Research | Research Methods for the Social Sciences", n.d.). This idea will be discussed further with reference to the positionality of the researcher.

3.2.2 Positionality of the Researcher

Creswell (2009) asserts that: “In qualitative research, the researcher is not a blank slate; the position of the researcher, their biases, background, and values, influence every element of the research, from the construction of the research question to the interpretation of findings”. As a past pupil of a Gaelscoil, who quickly became a linguaphile in secondary school, the author of this study remained aware that her own background, expectations, or personal perceptions may bring an element of bias in favour of a potential link between attending a Gaelscoil and additional language acquisition. The researcher mediated for this by obtaining other sources of data to verify interpretations and triangulate findings.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

There are various ethical issues which must be considered prior to and while carrying out research. Level 1 ethical approval was granted by SERC in Marino Institute of Education in

March 2021. The Research Ethics Reference Number (RERN) for this dissertation is: 05-PME-1-21.

Beneficence: The researcher acknowledged her responsibility to maximise the benefits of participating in her study, while also minimising the risks involved. The researcher operated within an ethic of respect. The researcher treated her proposed participants fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and integrity, "regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant difference" (BERA, 2011, p. 5). To adhere to this code of ethics, informed consent was obtained from participants. A risk assessment was conducted, and procedures were put in place for any issues which may have arisen. The researcher reassured her participants that no sensitive subjects would be explored.

Participants were not incentivised to take part in this research. Voluntary informed consent was sought by distributing letters of invitation, with accompanying project information and consent forms. It is important that participants "understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported" (BERA, 2011, p. 5). Participants were informed of the duration of the interview, the purpose of the research, and their right to withdraw. The researcher put the participants at ease by explaining to them how confidentiality would be ensured in the study. All of the data collected was anonymised, by providing the interviewees with pseudonyms.

3.4 Collection of Data

3.4.1 Methodology

In order to outline the methodology chosen for this dissertation, it first proves useful to consult a definition of methodology: "The methodology might almost be viewed as a recipe

that allows a researcher to cook up findings to feed a research curiosity" (Egbert & Sanden, 2019, p. 73). Interviews were held with eight participants, who are past pupils of Gaelscoileanna and who pursued studies in languages at third level: "qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher strives to understand the interviewee's subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than generating generalizable understandings of large groups of people" (McGrath, et al., 2018, p. 1002). With respect to the recommended number of participants, Guest et al. (2006) allude to Kuzel (1992), who suggests "six to eight interviews for a homogeneous sample" (p. 61). However, it is recommended that the researcher uses their judgement when deciding on how many participants to interview and to offer an explanation (Cobern & Adams, 2020). The researcher's explanation for a sample size of eight participants is as follows: access to participants, timeline of study, and scope of the research question.

Prior to conducting the interviews, a set of possible prompts were generated to assist the researcher in encouraging the participants to add more detail to their answers: "the interviewer can probe, in order to dig deeper, into the interviewees' responses through follow-up questions" (McGrath et al., 2018, p. 1003). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and half of the participants residing in foreign countries, the majority of the interviews took place online, using Zoom, a video communications platform. However, in-person interviews would have enabled the researcher to analyse body language and observe visual cues.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher continued to be cognisant that she might unintentionally influence interviewee responses. She sought clarification, when unsure of the interviewee's meaning. Barbour and Schostak (2005) list seven key concepts of interviews: power, social position, value, trust, meaning, interpretation, and uncertainty, all of which the researcher strove to bear in mind.

The interviews were recorded using audio only. The researcher sought permission from her participants to do this. The researcher chose to take notes during the interviews, to have a record of the important points of discussion in case any issues arose while analysing the audio file. Some of the interviews were transcribed manually into a word document. For other interviews, Temi, audio to text automatic transcription software, was utilised. Audio files and interview transcripts were stored on password-protected devices. The data will be kept for at least one year, following which time, it will be destroyed safely. The researcher explained to the participants her reason for wishing to record the interviews, the way in which the audio files would be stored, and the procedure for the destruction of the data after a year had passed.

Barbour and Schostak (2005) refer to the work of Kvale (1996), who regards "the 'InterView' as a way of bringing together the multiple views of people" (p. 43). Additionally, the researcher endeavoured to establish a rapport with the interviewees:

> Building rapport and establishing comfortable interactions in the qualitative interview situation is very important. … Rapport is also crucial during the interview enabling the respondent to provide a rich and detailed account of the experiences at the heart of the study. (McGrath et al., 2018, p. 1003)

3.4.2 Interview Schedule

An interview schedule was prepared in advance to guide the interview, and to ensure that the topics covered were relevant to the research question. It included an opening script, which introduced the interviewer and research topic. The researcher posed open-ended questions to encourage conversation, and to yield descriptive data, for example: "What factors influenced your decision to study languages at third level?" This method of questioning was used to

generate responses which would reflect the "richness and complexity" of the views of each participant (Denscombe, 2014, p. 166).

3.4.3 Piloting

Prior to conducting the interviews, a pilot study was carried out. Bryman (2008) upholds that piloting of interview questions is vital to establish that they are fit for purpose. This proffered an opportunity to pre-test the interview schedule in advance. The interview schedule was tested with two participants, both of whom fitted the selection criteria. This provided a clear indication of how the questions would work in practice, and highlighted any areas for improvement (Denscombe, 2007). Mc Grath et al. (2018) maintain that: "By conducting test interviews the novice researcher gains skills prior to embarking on data collection. … They furnish the researcher with an opportunity to explore language, the clarity of the questions, and aspects of active listening" (p. 1003). Following the pilot interviews, some questions were amended to ensure clarity, simplicity of language, and that they were open-ended in nature.

3.4.4 Participants / Sampling

Selection criteria for the participants in this research centred upon past pupils of Gaelscoileanna, who chose to study languages at third level. These participants were selected because the researcher sought to determine if a connection exists between attending a Gaelscoil and additional language acquisition. The strategy used to identify the research participants consisted of convenience sampling, by which the researcher made use of connections she already had. The participants were Irish adults, ranging in age from 20 to 50, some of whom are still living in Ireland, while others have moved abroad. Cohen et al (2007) provide a useful definition of convenience sampling: "Convenience sampling – or, as it is

sometimes called, accidental or opportunity sampling – involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained" (pp. 113–114). Participants were invited to the study through emails. Therefore, the setting for sampling was remote. This convenience sampling strategy led to snowball sampling, whereby research participants recruited other participants for the study. According to theory, once the ball is rolling, it gathers more "snow" on its trajectory, and it grows bigger and bigger.

3.5 Analysis

3.5.1 Coding

As referenced at the beginning of this chapter, the researcher familiarised herself with the data during the interviews, transcriptions, and subsequent re-reading of the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2012) advocate the use of thematic analysis (TA) for qualitative researchers, arguing that: "TA is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis" (p. 57). They elaborate by stating that:

> TA is a method of systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning *across* a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57)

Next, the researcher began to sort through the data, taking note of patterns. Codes were then generated by undertaking a systematic process whereby segments of the data relevant to the research question were marked with a code. Braun and Clarke (2012) argue that "Codes are the building blocks of analysis" (p. 61). By coding in this manner, the researcher hoped that the data would be organised into specific topics: "Codes identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question" (Braun & Clarke,

2012, p. 61). An inductive approach to data coding and analysis was employed. Braun and Clarke define this as "a bottom-up approach", which is "driven by what is in the data. What this means is that the codes and themes derive from the content of the data themselves" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). The researcher recognised the need to create themes from the codes: "analysts are like sculptors, making choices about how to shape and craft their piece of stone (the "raw data") into a work of art (the analysis)." (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). Similarities and differences between the various interviews were noted, and these were then compared and contrasted to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

3.6 Limitations and Obstacles

This dissertation mainly took place over a nine-month period. Given that this was a relatively short timescale, it was imperative that each stage of the research process was carried out effectively and efficiently. This brief length of time would not facilitate a longitudinal study. Since the advised word count was 10,000, the researcher decided to explore existing secondary research and to conduct interviews with eight participants. The timeframe of the data collection process ran from early January to mid-February, thus constituting a six-week period.

While focus groups were initially considered, as individual interviews are more time-consuming, the researcher remained conscious that participants might have felt less comfortable sharing their experiences in a group setting: "Some [individuals] may be reluctant to discuss their experiences in a public forum" (Barbour & Schostak, 2005, p. 45). This could be due to factors such as not knowing other participants and worrying that confidentiality could be compromised: "there may be particular sensitivities involved in bringing together certain individuals or groups" (Barbour & Schostak, 2005, p. 45). The researcher accepted that providing each participant with opportunities to voice their views, in

addition to observing the reactions of others, would be demanding for a sole researcher. It was decided that there would not be adequate time to distribute questionnaires, or to hold focus groups. Completing a research project throughout COVID-19 rendered it difficult to source participants. With the imposed lockdowns, it was necessary to adhere to public health guidelines when collecting data. Participants were not as forthcoming as a result. Therefore, this was a small-scale study.

In view of the fact that the researcher used connections she already had, it was recognised that participants may feel obliged to take part, but the researcher endeavoured to reduce this pressure. Hence, the sampling was not random. It transpired that nine out of the ten interviewees (including the two pilot participants) were female. Thus, another limitation of this study could be a low male representation. Nyikos (2008) refers to the work of Gu (2002) in terms of gender in language learning: "Studies have consistently found that females place a greater relative importance on and invest more time in language learning than males because they see greater potential benefit from languages in their future careers and personal lives" (p. 78). Thus, this partially accounts for the gender imbalance among participants in this study.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

3.7.1 Trustworthiness of Data

The author of this study promoted mutual trust by elucidating the rationale for this project. During the interviews, the researcher offered respondents opportunities to pause, allowing them to reflect upon their responses. Their disclosures were treated with respect, and the researcher made sure their data was accurately represented. Several strategies were employed to minimise any potential threats to validity. By recording and transcribing all interviews, a clear audit trail was maintained. It proved challenging to achieve a balance between

encouragement and impartiality during the interviews. However, the researcher kept an open mind and looked for negative cases throughout, as Robson (2011) notes: "The search for negative cases is an important means of countering researcher bias" (p. 159). The timeline of the research would not allow for three methods, i.e. the inclusion of questionnaires and/or focus groups. However, the combination of the literature review and the semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to promote trustworthiness of data, and as Robson (2011) assures: "Triangulation can help to counter all of the threats to validity" (p. 156). Regarding Creswell's (2003) eight primary strategies to "check the accuracy of findings", the researcher used "*rich, thick description* to convey the findings" and clarified her personal bias, as "this self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers" (p. 196). The researcher used peer debriefing "to enhance the accuracy of the account", whereby a person "reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

3.8 Conclusion

A qualitative design was chosen for this dissertation. A pilot study was effectuated, whereby the interview schedule was tested. The sampling strategies were described. Semi-structured interviews were held with eight participants, who are past pupils of Gaelscoileanna and pursued studies in languages at third level. The average length of each interview was 44 minutes long. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, thematically analysed by generating a series of codes, and emerging patterns and themes were noticed. Ethical considerations, the positionality of the researcher, the limitations and obstacles, and reliability and validity were addressed.

Chapter 4 ~ Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to ask Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: *Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?* Eight interviewees [Pseudonyms: Éadaoin, Eoghan, Lily, Ríonach, Fiadh, Alice, Eve, and Muireann] furnished the researcher with in-depth, rich data, and provided insights into key aspects of the connection between attending a Gaelscoil and language learning. This chapter, focussing on the analysis and discussion of findings, addresses six themes which arose from the data: the advantages of bilingualism, the ease of acquiring an additional language, the role of parents in influencing motivation to learn languages, attitude towards the Irish language, language and culture, and early immersion in the Irish language.

4.2 Advantages of Bilingualism

Firstly, the advantages of bilingualism is discussed. The interviewees maintain that by attending a Gaelscoil, thus having language input in two languages: English and Irish and being bilingual from a very young age, they were instilled with a heightened sense of language awareness. The acquisition of further languages was a natural progression: "*being in a Gaelscoil … growing up with two languages … the adoption of new languages was quite simple because … we're already used to having English and Irish and how they didn't always, you know, add up"* (Éadaoin). This is in line with research by Cenoz (2003, 2013) regarding the effects of bilingualism on TLA. Éadaoin elaborates:

> *you are understanding that in different languages, you have different words for different things. … it kind-of helps you to just view things in a broader sense and in a non-linear … it kind-of helped us to … have a broader understanding of things. … I think that's a general thing for people who speak more than one language, … it helps you to kind-of be a bit more open to ideas.*

Openness appeared as an emergent code in five out of eight interviews. The past pupil of a Gaelscoil becomes receptive to ideas. This in turn unlocks an entire realm of possibilities: "*it helped us so much growing up bilingual. ... it just kinda like opened a different world for us that a lot of Irish people don't have access to*" (Éadaoin).

When sharing her Gaelscoil experience, Fiadh admits she "*definitely felt at an advantage*". Eoghan lends credence to Fiadh's claim:

> *it was never a burden on me ... to learn another language, it was the opposite in fact. ... it never ... impacted negatively on any of my other subjects ... it helped a lot with, em, learning, I think in general, just to have that additional language and to have learned it so easily.*

When reflecting upon his feelings towards the Irish language, Eoghan asserts that attending a Gaelscoil did not have any adverse effects on his other subjects. Rather, he views his early immersion in the Irish language as an asset. Alice displays a similar attitude to Eoghan:

> *I'm really glad that I learned it that young. ... I've heard like people who are bilingual, find it a bit easier to learn more languages ... I would consider myself bilingual in Irish because of the way I kind-of grew up with it. It was there the whole time ... like you would nearly think in Irish.*

Alice highlights the presence of Irish throughout her childhood, while also commenting on the interrelationship between bilingualism and the acquisition of additional languages.

4.3 Ease of Acquiring an Additional Language

Having evaluated the advantages of bilingualism, this section focusses on the ease of acquiring an additional language, a theme which was present in 62.5% of interviews. Éadaoin alludes to the multiplicity of perspectives pertaining to additional language acquisition among bilingual learners:

> *I guess if you have more than one language, you have more than one reference point, so it's easy to imagine that there's a third and you're not trying to like fit a language*

> *into like a box because you understand … I have two boxes, so maybe it doesn't fit into either. If there are two, there could be more.*

This complements the findings of Dillon (2011) relating to the concept of additive bilingualism, whereby L1 and L2 coexist in a supportive relationship. By viewing these boxes as separate entities, Éadaoin remains aware of the possibility of the existence of other languages, each with their own set of rules and structures. Eoghan is in agreement:

> *I'd be more open … to, um, the fact that there's many ways of saying the same thing, like … the structure of sentences and grammatically. … having like English and Irish quite strong as languages, that the third language would, eh, come more easily to you.*

Eoghan is cognisant of the value of bilingualism when it comes to learning a third language. He apprehends the importance of accessing previous linguistic knowledge concerning grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary, when comparing similarities and differences between languages. Eoghan illustrates the traits of a good language learner (Rubin, 1975). Fiadh's views are similar:

> *the awareness, um, and the ability to adapt to different … language structures … grammar … definitely helped because … you're not always comparing everything to English. … You … have a reference point for … different possibilities, em, for the way things can function, or you can maybe appreciate … that the language is structured differently rather than seeing that as a sort-of obstacle maybe that has to be overcome. … it allows you to be a little bit more open.*

The word "open" surfaces as a recurring motif throughout the data. When contemplating factors that influenced her decision to study languages at third level, Lily maintains: "*it was a pathway that was already open for me*". Like five other interviewees, Lily gives the impression that her learning of the Irish language was almost effortless.

Lily, Ríonach, and Eve exude confidence vis-à-vis additional language acquisition. They relate this assuredness to their mastery of Irish: "*cuz I had the grasp for one language, it is easier to grasp the other language*" (*Lily*), "*you feel you've succeeded in one language, so why couldn't I succeed in another?*" (Ríonach), and "*I already have two languages under*

my belt. I'm like surely I can try and learn another one" (Eve). Ríonach accentuates the transfer of skills across languages (*Primary Language Curriculum,* NCCA, 2019):

> *I wasn't afraid, some people going into German, you, you could tell from them that they didn't have another language. … They were kind-of afraid to, to do the German pronunciation. … Whereas I was already used to pronouncing things in an Irish language.*

Ríonach elucidates how her experience of the Irish language proved beneficial in her studies of German:

> *I wasn't afraid to, you know, converse or try and say things in German. Whereas I felt other people at the time would hold themselves back because they didn't … the thing I put it down to was they didn't, they didn't have any experience in any other language. They were kind-of afraid of it.*

Similarly, Eoghan expresses that he was comfortable speaking Irish in front of classmates in school, and that when he reached university, he noticed this was "*more natural*" to him: "*So it wasn't a huge step to be speaking in French, … other languages in front of people*". Eoghan's familiarity with conversing in another language throughout his childhood and adolescence continues to help him in his day-to-day interactions in Spain. Alice intimates the ease of learning Japanese:

> *it came a bit easier to me because of the fact that I can speak Irish. … with Japanese, I feel like I'm speaking it, like how I speak Irish, like it just comes out rather than forming the sentences.*

Alice's instinctual manner of speaking Irish is transferring into her spoken Japanese.

4.4 The Role of Parents in Influencing Motivation to Learn Languages

Following an exploration of the ease of acquiring an additional language, the third part of this chapter concentrates upon the role of parents in influencing motivation to learn languages. Five participants openly acknowledge the influence of parents on their attitude towards

language learning, sharing that there was an emphasis on and respect for languages within the home environment: "*a big, huge influence there. … trying to promote the Irish language and teach it. … definite respect for, for languages*" (Eoghan).

Alice repeats three times that her mother "*really wanted us to know Irish*", but reveals that she did not show interest in foreign languages. Contrastingly, two interviewees maintain their parents did not have a "*big effect*" (Eve) on their decision to study languages: "*I wouldn't say they had a large influence on my decision to study languages…. I guess they supported me, um, in doing that. I don't think I was necessarily pushed or influenced in any way*" (Fiadh). Muireann does not believe she was coerced into studying languages by her parents: "*they definitely encouraged me. … They'd be saying, oh, languages are great for jobs and it's a great skill to have. They'd be saying those things, but they weren't like really sitting me down and telling me to do it*". Here, Muireann hints at the subtle encouragement of languages by her parents.

Seven participants attended afterschool classes in French, German, or Spanish. Interviewees also spoke of language exchanges, hosting international students, summer holidays abroad, and visiting relatives in European countries. Ríonach and Éadaoin underline the influence of their parents in imparting the idea that having an additional language was a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) in terms of employment and travel: "*Mom was very influential because she was all about Gaeilge and I suppose travel*" (Ríonach) and:

> *my parents very much pushed the notion on me that like it's really important to have a language outside of English and Irish for … employment and travel. … that was a notion that was like kind-of ingrained in me from quite a young age.* (Éadaoin)

Overall, it seems the parenting technique of positive reinforcement played a role in motivating Gaelscoil alumni to study languages at third level. This is in congruence with research on parental involvement in Irish immersion primary education (Kavanagh, 2013). There is no question that parents impact attitude towards language learning.

4.5 Attitude towards the Irish Language

After reflecting upon the role of parents in influencing motivation to learn languages, the following theme centres upon attitude towards the Irish language. Éadaoin refers to the normality of the presence of Irish in their daily lives when they were growing up: "*I remember just thinking like this is normal . … I never really thought twice about it*". Eoghan considers his learning of the Irish language as instinctive: "*I felt like I never had to study Irish. … I learned Irish without having to learn it. … I wouldn't even consider it as a language subject I had to learn*". Eoghan does not perceive Irish as a language with its own rules and structures. His understanding of *Gaeilge* is intuitive and organic. This correlates with the findings apropos of the efficacy of immersion in developing bilingualism (Kennedy, 2012).

All participants are protective of their national language and argue for its preservation: "*I'm very interested in, like the preservation of Irish, um, as like a very threatened language and a dying language. … it's really important to maintain it and promote it*" (Éadaoin). Fiadh evinces the nexus between the Irish language and nationalism:

> *you are also sort-of brought up with … a very, um, strong relationship with the language itself and with sort-of Irish nationalism … and to be proud of the language and the heritage and the culture. … I always was glad that … my parents sent me to an Irish-speaking school because I was able to connect with this, em, to a larger extent maybe than other people.*

She associates her ability to connect the Irish language with its surrounding culture, with being a past pupil of a Gaelscoil. This is consistent with the notion that Irish medium education consolidates cultural identity (Kennedy, 2012). Many interviewees mention the inextricable link between the language and national identity:

> *I realised that it* [*Gaeilge*] *was … endangered and something we need to preserve and protect. So, I think I became more appreciative of it and more proud of it … wanted to get involved in like keeping it alive.* (Muireann)

Participants exhibit enthusiasm for the revival and continued use of Irish. Muireann affirms: "*I think that's the main thing it* [the Gaelscoil] *gave me was a positive attitude towards Irish. … that's what they* [Gaelscoileanna] *give most people*". The results of this study reveal the truth in Muireann's words. No interviewee reported otherwise.

4.6 Language and Culture

Following an analysis on attitude towards the Irish language, the fifth aspect of this chapter examines the relationship between language and culture. This theme featured in all interviews. Ríonach contends: "*They* [language and culture] *go in hand in hand*". This viewpoint conveys the significance of cultural systems in language acquisition (Bavin, 1995). Éadaoin invokes the necessity of preserving Irish culture, realising its intrinsic ties to *Gaeilge*:

> *it's obviously important to like preserve our culture and to remain connected to it. … especially with a country like Ireland where like, we're the only ones who speak Irish, it's not spoken anywhere else. … it is important to have like a national identity and like to be connected to that.*

This aligns with Boroditsky (2011), who ventures that every language epitomises the philosophy and wisdom of a particular culture, as evolved through the ages. Eve assumes a similar stance: "*They are definitely linked. I mean without culture, you don't have language. I mean if you didn't have culture all over the world, what language would we be speaking? … there's such a big connection*". Alice explains that the Japanese have "*different ways of talking to people older than you and like showing respect*", and that there are three levels of politeness in the language. Alice voices that: "*I definitely see it like in Japanese, that the culture is really a big part of the language*". Thus, the interconnectedness of language acquisition and culture becomes visible.

Muireann pinpoints culture as a deciding factor in pursuing studies in languages at university: "*That's probably the number one reason … the whole culture surrounding both languages* [French and Italian]". Eoghan draws a parallel between Irish speakers and the facets of Irish culture in which they are involved: " *people who speak the Irish language and how it comes across … in other parts of their life … like GAA or musically or dance … there's a strong link*". This supports the recommendations of the *PLC* (NCCA, 2019) to promote an increased awareness of Irish culture.

4.7 Early Immersion in the Irish Language

Having assessed the interconnection between language and culture, the final element of this chapter compares opinions of participants towards early immersion in the Irish language, a theme which came to the fore in all interviews. Critical periods for language learning emerged as a code in three interviews: "*it's easiest to learn a language when you're young because you don't have … anxieties about like your confidence … you're just more open*" (Éadaoin). This is validated by the work of Griffiths (2008) on the success of young learners in language acquisition. Éadaoin reiterates: "*the younger, the better*". Muireann agrees:

> *I think early immersion to any language is the key to actually learning it. … it's the best time to learn a language, best time to learn anything. … if I started Irish at 15, I would never get as good as I was because I spoke it so young.*

This disputes Roessingh's (2006) small-scale studies, which imply that "age 15-16 is a good age" (p. 95). Moreover, the ease of learning a language as a child, as emphasised by Éadaoin and Muireann, contradicts the results of Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) that a critical period between the ages of two and twelve cannot be found in SLA.

Several interviewees associate early immersion with the preservation of the Irish language: "*I think they're important to have in our society, like in our education system, if they got rid of Gaelscoileanna, I don't think the language would survive*" (Lily) and:

> *we were always fostered with a great love and appreciation for Irish. … I guess living in a post-colonial society … it is a very important part of our identity. … it's important that people sort-of have an early exposure to it and can learn to appreciate it rather than seeing it as something that's been sort-of imposed upon them.* (Fiadh)

These avowals identify early immersion in Gaelscoileanna as a prerequisite for keeping the Irish language alive. Eoghan raises the concept of multilingualism in an international context: "*you can see that in many other countries … when they're immersed in multiple languages, like from a very young age, then it's no problem for, for young kids to pick that up*". Eoghan's assertion is corroborated by studies in bilingual communities in Canada, the Basque Country, and Catalonia (Cenoz, 2013). He avers that early immersion was "*a huge advantage … not just in terms of learning other languages, em, but also in terms of my, attitude to, eh, many things, eh, abroad and in Ireland and culturally-speaking*". Eoghan extends the advantages of attending a Gaelscoil beyond the domain of language acquisition and into the fields of travel, his country, and culture. Lily's opinion of early immersion resonates:

> *you're exposed to that language* [Irish] *from such a young age. … even if you do take it for granted … the language is still there, it's still alive. Whereas if you got rid of it* [early immersion] *… it would be gone. … It'd be like a long-forgotten thing, that would only be in books.*

The researcher felt that the evocative nature and poignancy of Lily's words serve as a fitting end to this review of early immersion in the Irish language.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter on the analysis and discussion of findings took six nascent themes into consideration, which were relevant to the research question: *Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?* These included the advantages of bilingualism, the ease of acquiring an additional language, the role of parents in influencing motivation to learn languages, attitude towards the Irish language, language and culture, and early immersion in the Irish language. Muireann summarises this chapter effectively: "*the … one big difference is like, it* [early immersion] *gives you the confidence … it's not like this crazy bizarre concept to you that you could speak a second language. It's like, oh, I already do that".* For the Gaelscoil alumni in this study, SLA did not pose any problems. Instead, it kindled in them a confidence in their ability to learn languages, and it inspired them to engage in further academic pursuits.

Chapter 5 ~ Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This research reveals that early immersion in the Irish language in Gaelscoileanna and success in additional language acquisition are strongly linked. The literature review set the scene by exploring relevant themes such as additional language acquisition, bilingualism and multilingualism, critical periods for language learning, the Irish language, culture, attitude, and motivation. Semi-structured interviews with eight Gaelscoil alumni, who studied languages at third level, yielded illuminating data and deepened understanding about factors that impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning. This chapter presents the main results based on the analysis of findings. Recommendations for future practice and research are proposed.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Advantages of Bilingualism

Bilingualism is an advantage in additional language acquisition, as it endows learners with a sharpened sense of language awareness. It is not a "*crazy bizarre concept*" to speak a second language as it is a skill which all past pupils of Gaelscoileanna already possess (Muireann). A trait of openness emerged in 62.5% of interviews, both in the spirit of receptibility to ideas and in forging meaningful connections and bright futures. No participant reported that it was an additional challenge to complete their primary education through *Gaeilge*. In fact, the majority deem it a great asset throughout life.

5.2.2 Ease of Acquiring an Additional Language

The concept of additive bilingualism arose, whereby English and Irish can form a symbiotic relationship. The importance of previous related knowledge concerning grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary is acknowledged. Cenoz (2013) refers to this as using "a broader linguistic repertoire" (p. 72). Identifying as bilingual inspired confidence in Gaelscoil alumni in terms of their ability to acquire an additional language and their aspirations to follow further academic pursuits in languages. The transfer of skills across languages, as advocated by the *PLC* (NCCA, 2019) came to the fore.

5.2.3 The Role of Parents in Influencing Motivation to Learn Languages

This study raises questions regarding the role of parents in influencing motivation to learn languages. Five interviewees discussed parental involvement in shaping their attitude towards language learning. In contrast, two participants were unconvinced their parents had exerted a "*a large influence*" on their decision to study languages (Fiadh). If this study or indeed future research were to adopt a more psychological lens, the parenting styles suggested by Baumrind (1971) could be analysed here. 87.5% of interviewees participated in afterschool language classes before transitioning to post-primary education. This highlights the opportunities provided by parents to support language learning. Two participants expressed that their parents recognised languages as forms of cultural capital and linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1973, 1972/1977).

5.2.4 Attitude towards the Irish Language

The Irish language is part of everyday existence for Gaelscoil alumni. Their grasp of *Gaeilge* is inherent and natural. All interviewees argue for the preservation of the Irish language, pinpointing strong ties between *Gaeilge* and national identity.

5.2.5 Language and Culture

The significance of cultural systems in language acquisition is undeniable. Half of the participants maintain that the culture attached to a language constituted a factor in their decision to study it at third level. A parallel is drawn between speakers of *Gaeilge* and people who are involved in aspects of Irish culture, linking back to the *PLC* (NCCA, 2019), whereby language awareness and cultural awareness are interwoven.

5.2.6 Early Immersion in the Irish Language

Interviewees contend that early immersion is key to successful acquisition of the Irish language. A strong association between Gaelscoileanna and the survival of *Gaeilge* is visible. The benefits of early immersion in Gaelscoileanna such as connection to Irish culture, recognition of the importance of national identity, the possibility of travel and living abroad, were all explored.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 Gender and Language Learning

The mothers of three participants spoke *Gaeilge* or were from the Gaeltacht, whereas their fathers only spoke English. An additional two interviewees commented on how their mothers

were more encouraging and enthusiastic about language learning than their fathers. This evokes the question of gender and language learning (Nyikos, 2008). Future research could delve deeper into this gender imbalance within an Irish context.

5.3.2 DEIS Gaelscoileanna

In subsequent research, the sampling could be extended to different social backgrounds to include past pupils of DEIS Gaelscoileanna. This would lead to more comprehensive and inclusive findings.

5.3.3 Curriculum Reform, Policy, and Pedagogical Practice

This study informs policy and practice, as it of particular relevance to the implementation of the *PLC* (NCCA, 2019). This integrated language curriculum advocates the transfer of skills and encourages language learning. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is imperative so that teachers are confident in making the transfer of skills explicit and in promoting cultural and language awareness.

5.3.4 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 – 2030

One of the underlying principles of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 to 2030 is to "enhance and extend ability in Irish more deeply and among larger numbers of people" (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 2010, p. 11). To achieve this governmental aim, there is a need for more Gaelscoileanna, thus guaranteeing early immersion in the Irish language. This Strategy aspires to augment "the number of daily speakers of Irish from the current level of approximately 83, 000 to 250,000" (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 2010, p. 9). While more Gaelscoileanna

will increase Irish speakers within the education system, it will also instil in children a positive attitude towards *Gaeilge* and foster cultural and language awareness. This solution will create a multilingual society, as a positive correlation is found between bilingualism and additional language acquisition.

5.3.5 International Relevance

This study is of international relevance as it applies to immersion contexts such as the Basque country, Catalonia, and French-speaking parts of Canada. Further research could be conducted in these geographical areas to determine the extent to which early bilingualism impacts ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning.

5.4 A Parting Word

This chapter addressed the results of this study. Several recommendations were put forward including gender and language learning, DEIS Gaelscoileanna, curriculum reform, policy, pedagogical practice, the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 to 2030, and international relevance. Other relevant themes which emerged from the data but were omitted due to the scope of the research, comprise dyslexia and language learning, experiences abroad such as Erasmus studies and language exchanges, and the importance of language type.

One of the participants shared a vivid anecdote from her childhood: "*I remember after every mass, we'd go up to my neighbour's house and everyone would … sit around … drinking tea and speaking Irish*" (Éadaoin). This brief vignette epitomises the essence of language – communication. Furthermore, this authentic account encapsulates the intrinsic connection between language and culture, and how the two serve to complement one another. While this is a small-scale study, these Irish snapshots are far-reaching and point towards the

positive impact of attending a Gaelscoil on ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning.

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Appendix 1 ~ Ethical Approval Letter

Ms. Owens

12.03.2021

Ref# SERC-10-03-21-05-PME-1-21

Research Focus/ Title: Academic Year 2020/2021 PME1

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your submission to the Student Ethics in Research Committee. Your application was reviewed 10.03.2021 at the SERC Committee meeting and has been approved. Please note, your approval is conditional on your research instrument(s) being approved by your allocated supervisor prior to commencing data collection.

Please note for all future correspondence (including emails) that your Research Ethics Reference Number (RERN) is: 05-PME-1-21

If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Regards,

NAME

Chair of Student Ethics in Research Committee

……

On Behalf of SERC Committee

Appendix 2 ~ Letter of Invitation

Institiúid Oideachais MARINO Institute of Education
An Associated College of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?

Letter of Invitation (Participants)

DD/MM/YYYY

Dear NAME,

I would like to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting on the following research question: "*Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?*" I hope that the findings of the study will inform Irish educators about the possible connection between Gaelscoileanna and additional language acquisition. These findings will be included in my research dissertation. Your participation would involve a semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes in duration. This research is being supervised by Emma Ní Mhaoilstéighe. Please take your time to read through the details of the study in the Project Information (attached) and if you agree to participate, please sign and return the attached Consent Form by email to MIE MICROSOFT OUTLOOK EMAIL.

Your input would be very valuable to this study. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Sarah Owens
Professional Master of Education
EMAIL ADDRESS
PHONE NUMBER

Appendix 3 ~ Research Information Leaflet

Institiúid Oideachais MARINO Institute of Education

An Associated College of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?

Project Information

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

I am a second year student completing the Professional Master of Education in Marino Institute of Education. This research will explore the question: "*Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact on ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning*?", with the aim of determining if going to a Gaelscoil contributes to the ease at which students learn an additional language in secondary school, and identifying to what extent being in a Gaelscoil influences one's decision to study languages at third level. I have always been interested in learning more about the possible connection between Gaelscoileanna and additional language learning. I hope that this research will improve my own practice and the practice of others by using evidence to better understand the possible link between Gaelscoileanna and additional language acquisition. This is important because I hope that my research project will comment on the significance of immersing children in a second language from an early age in order to promote successful additional language acquisition throughout life.

This dissertation research is being supervised by Emma Ní Mhaoilstéighe. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the personal data you provide. You are free to contact my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about the study: DISSERTATION SUPERVISOR'S EMAIL ADDRESS.

PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH

Participation in this research involves a semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes. This qualitative interview will explore open-ended questions such as "Tell me about your initial experience of additional language learning in your first year of secondary school", "What factors influenced your decision to study languages at third level?" and "How did you find the oral language classes in your undergraduate programme?" If you give permission, the interview will be recorded by audio, to help with data analysis. The interview will take place at Marino Institute of Education, or another location convenient to you. If necessary, due to the pandemic, interviews will be held via a telephone call or conducted online using a video conferencing application such as Zoom.

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this research for any or no reason, and at any time. The information you provide will only be used for the purpose of exploring the research question set out above and will not be reused. In line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation, only essential personal data will be collected and all identifiers will be disaggregated from the data as soon as possible after collection. MIE will be the Data Controller for GDPR purposes. With your consent, your personal data will be shared with my research supervisor but not with any other third party. Personal data will be destroyed within a year of completion of the research dissertation.

When reporting on the information you provide, your data will be presented using pseudonyms. Your anonymised data will be aggregated with information from other participants and documentary sources. Anonymised data will be shared in my dissertation and other research related activities e.g. presentations, journals, conferences.

Appendix 4 ~ Consent Form for Interviews

Gaelscoil alumni who studied languages at third level: Does attending a Gaelscoil impact ability to acquire an additional language and attitude towards language learning?

Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete the following consent form and return it to me by email to RESEARCHER'S EMAIL ADDRESS.

I understand and agree that:

I am over 18 years of age.
The Project Information has been communicated to me.
I am aware that I can withdraw from this project at any time up to when my data has been anonymised and amalgamated.
I will participate voluntarily without incentive.
My data being treated with confidentiality and anonymity.
I will take part in a semi-structured interview, approximately 45 minutes in length.
My interview will be recorded using audio only.
My personal data may be shared with the research supervisor.
My anonymised data may be shared in this dissertation and via other research activities as they arise.

Name (PRINTED): _____

Name (Signature): _____

Date: _____

Appendix 5 ~ Schedule for Semi-Structured Interviews

Greeting/Introduction

I am a second year student on the Professional Master of Education in Marino Institute of Education. I really appreciate you agreeing to be interviewed for my study. This interview should take approximately 45 minutes. I would like to reassure you that anything you say will only be used for the purpose of exploring the research question and it will not be reused. I will use pseudonyms, so your anonymity is guaranteed. I hope these interviews will provide me with a greater understanding about the possible connection between Gaelscoileanna and additional language acquisition. Feel free to stop me at any stage if a question seems unclear. If any question should make you feel uncomfortable, you are under no obligation to answer it. There are no right or wrong answers here. I am interested in gaining an insight into the impact of attending a Gaelscoil as a child on your ability to acquire an additional language and your attitude towards language learning throughout life. I would be grateful if I could record this interview using audio alone to assist me with data analysis. Would that be alright with you? Míle buíochas! We will begin now.

1. To begin with, would you mind sharing a bit about yourself and your background?
2. Apart from English and Irish, what other languages have you studied?
3. What level of language competency do you think you're at in these languages?
4. Did you attend a Gaelscoil or a Gaelcholáiste or both?
5. Was Irish your first or second language?
6. Tell me about your experience of being in a Gaelscoil.
7. Were you exposed to much Irish at home or among family members?

8. How about within your wider community, for example with friends, in your hobbies – how present was the Irish language in these aspects of your life?
9. Can you remember anything about your attitude towards the Irish language as a child?
10. Did your opinion of the Irish language alter as you progressed through secondary school?
11. Tell me about your initial experience of additional language learning in your first year of secondary school.
12. To what extent did you enjoy your language classes in secondary school?
13. Did you have any prior experience of learning an additional language, apart from Irish, before your transition to secondary school? If so, what did that experience consist of?
14. Do your immediate family members speak many languages?
15. To what extent did your parents influence your motivation to learn languages?
16. What are your feelings towards the Irish language, now, as an adult, having gone through the Irish education system from first to third level?
17. What factors influenced your decision to study languages at third level?
18. Are there similarities between the Irish language and the language you chose to study at third level?
19. To what extent do you believe language type plays a role in contributing to the ease at which we acquire a language?
20. How did you find the oral language classes in your undergraduate programme?
21. Do you think that being required to use Irish daily in school as a child and/or as a teenager improved your confidence to speak a third language in front of peers?
22. Tell me about your involvement in aspects of Irish culture, for example – dance, music, and sport.

23. To what extent do you believe that a language and its surrounding culture are inextricably linked?
24. In what way did the culture attached to the languages you studied impact your decision to study them?
25. Have you continued to study languages in your own time, following the completion of your Level 7/Level 8 degree?
26. Do you aspire to acquiring more languages throughout your lifetime?
27. What is your opinion of early immersion in the Irish language?
28. Do you feel that your early immersion in the Irish language affected your ability to acquire other languages in later life?
29. Would you be an advocate for attending a Gaelscoil or a Gaelcholáiste or both? Why or why not?

Possible Prompts

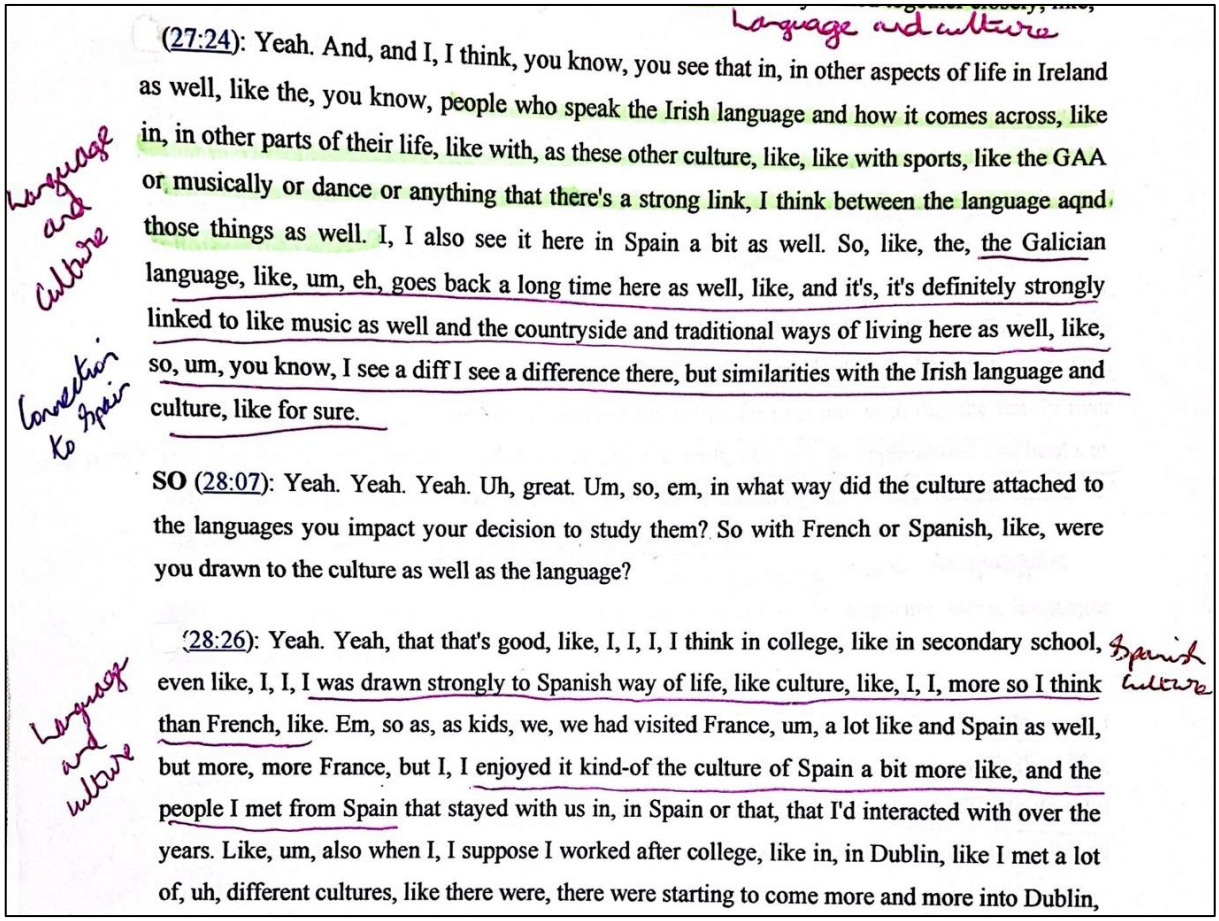
- That's very interesting. Could you tell me a little more about that?
- Would you mind elaborating on that point please?

Conclusion

The interview is now finished. Is there anything you would like to add to your comments? Thank you for taking part. Could we remain in contact as I continue to work on this dissertation in case any questions or queries emerge during my analysis of the research data?

Appendix 6 ~ Samples of Coded Interview Transcripts

Eoghan



Language and culture

(27:24): Yeah. And, and I, I think, you know, you see that in, in other aspects of life in Ireland as well, like the, you know, people who speak the Irish language and how it comes across, like in, in other parts of their life, like with, as these other culture, like, like with sports, like the GAA or musically or dance or anything that there's a strong link, I think between the language aqnd those things as well. I, I also see it here in Spain a bit as well. So, like, the, the Galician language, like, um, eh, goes back a long time here as well, like, and it's, it's definitely strongly linked to like music as well and the countryside and traditional ways of living here as well, like, so, um, you know, I see a diff I see a difference there, but similarities with the Irish language and culture, like for sure.

Language and culture

Connection to Spain

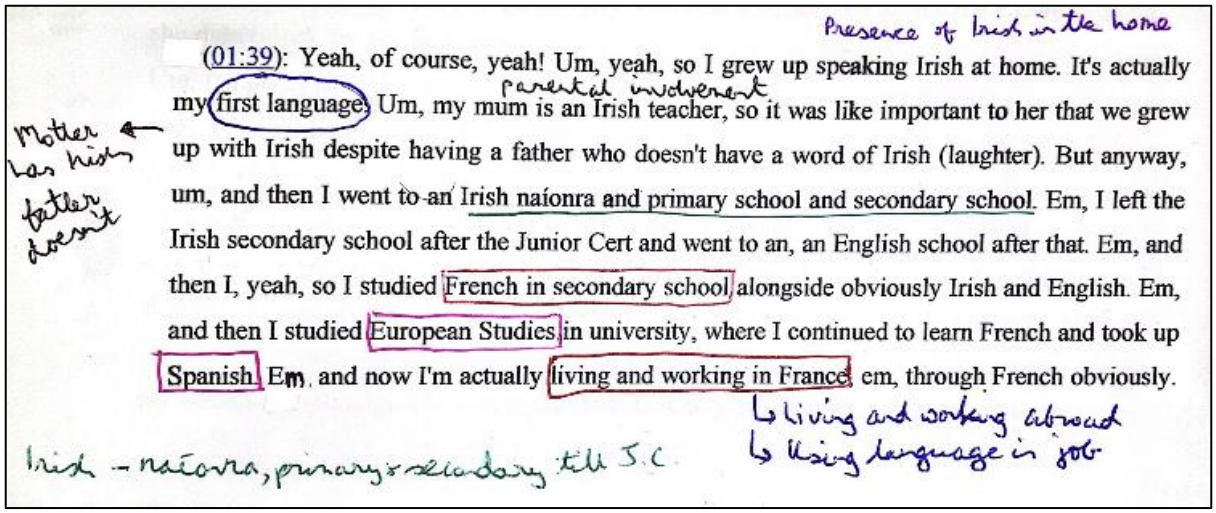
SO (28:07): Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Uh, great. Um, so, em, in what way did the culture attached to the languages you impact your decision to study them? So with French or Spanish, like, were you drawn to the culture as well as the language?

(28:26): Yeah. Yeah, that that's good, like, I, I, I, I think in college, like in secondary school, even like, I, I, I was drawn strongly to Spanish way of life, like culture, like, I, I, more so I think than French, like. Em, so as, as kids, we, we had visited France, um, a lot like and Spain as well, but more, more France, but I, I enjoyed it kind-of the culture of Spain a bit more like, and the people I met from Spain that stayed with us in, in Spain or that, that I'd interacted with over the years. Like, um, also when I, I suppose I worked after college, like in, in Dublin, like I met a lot of, uh, different cultures, like there were, there were starting to come more and more into Dublin,

Spanish culture

Language and culture

Éadaoin



Presence of Irish in the home

(01:39): Yeah, of course, yeah! Um, yeah, so I grew up speaking Irish at home. It's actually my first language. Um, my mum is an Irish teacher, so it was like important to her that we grew up with Irish despite having a father who doesn't have a word of Irish (laughter). But anyway, um, and then I went to an Irish naíonra and primary school and secondary school. Em, I left the Irish secondary school after the Junior Cert and went to an, an English school after that. Em, and then I, yeah, so I studied French in secondary school alongside obviously Irish and English. Em, and then I studied European Studies in university, where I continued to learn French and took up Spanish. Em, and now I'm actually living and working in France em, through French obviously.

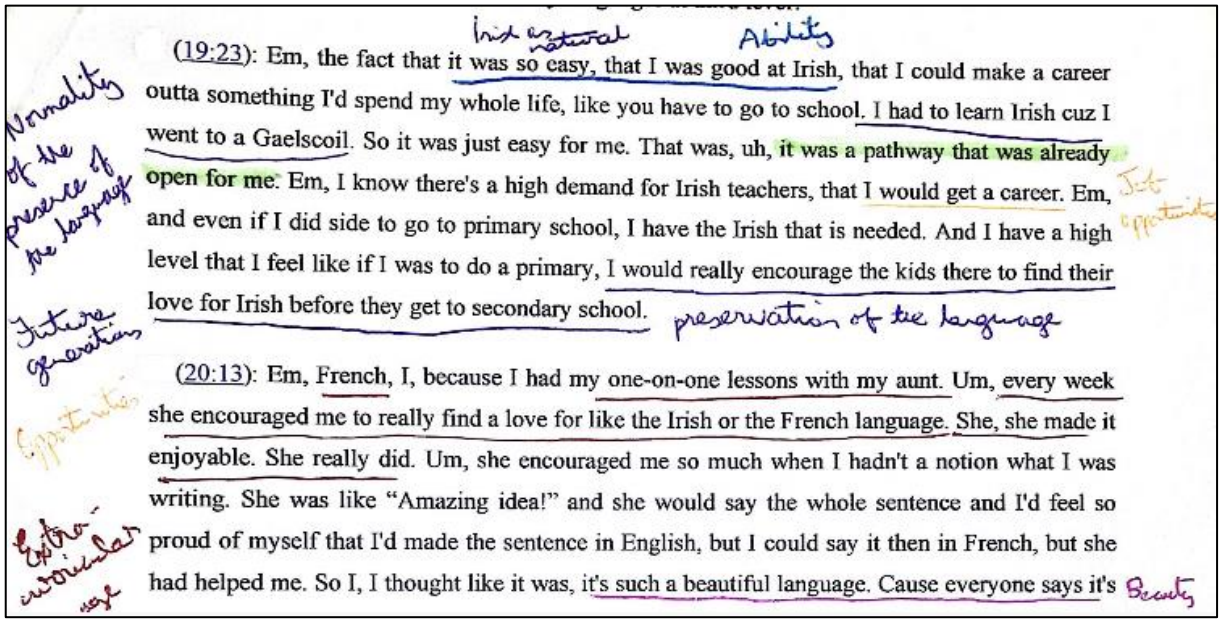
parental involvement

Mother has Irish, father doesn't

↳ Living and working abroad
↳ Using language in job

Irish - naíonra, primary & secondary till J.C

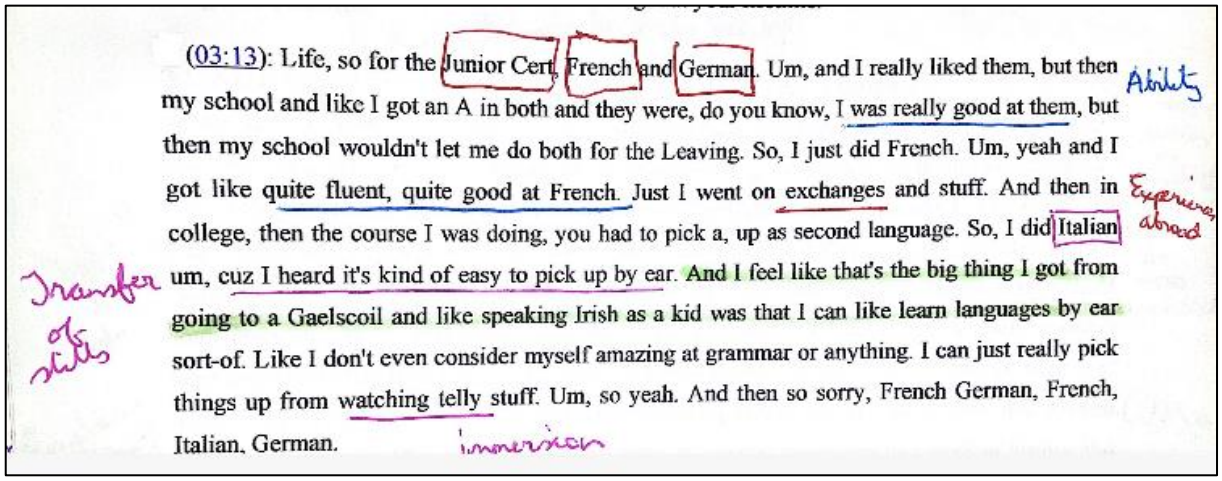
Lily



(19:23): Em, the fact that it was so easy, that I was good at Irish, that I could make a career outta something I'd spend my whole life, like you have to go to school. I had to learn Irish cuz I went to a Gaelscoil. So it was just easy for me. That was, uh, it was a pathway that was already open for me. Em, I know there's a high demand for Irish teachers, that I would get a career. Em, and even if I did side to go to primary school, I have the Irish that is needed. And I have a high level that I feel like if I was to do a primary, I would really encourage the kids there to find their love for Irish before they get to secondary school.

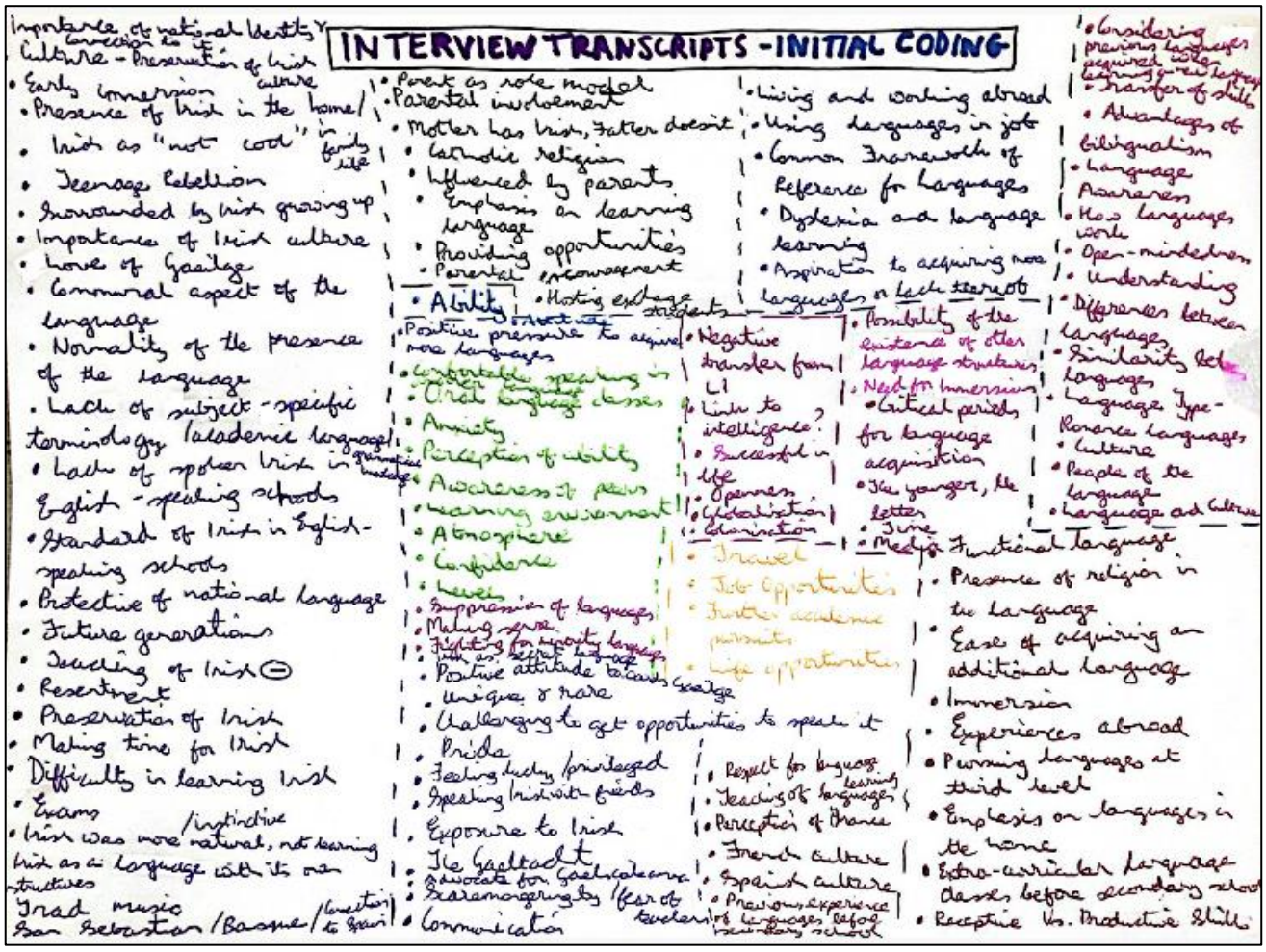
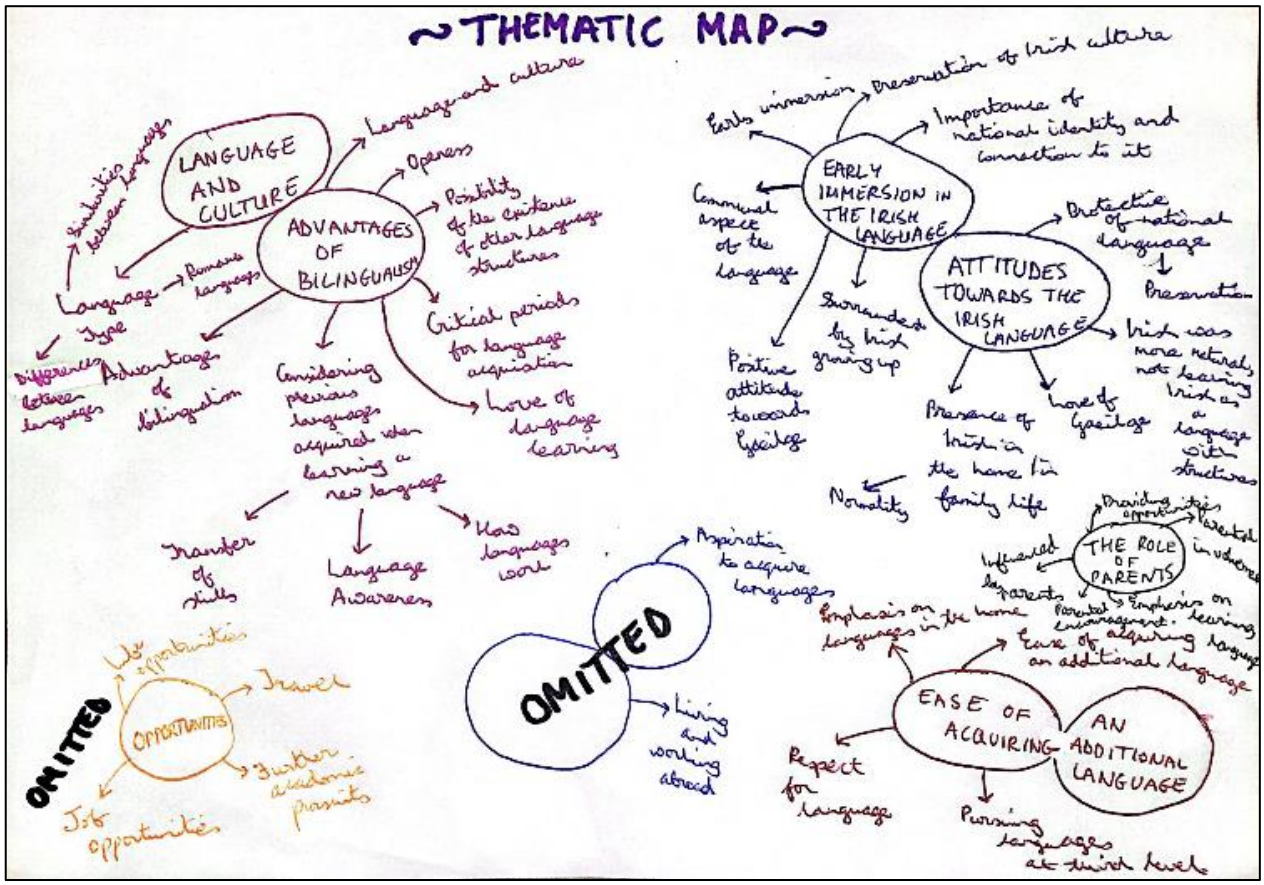
(20:13): Em, French, I, because I had my one-on-one lessons with my aunt. Um, every week she encouraged me to really find a love for like the Irish or the French language. She, she made it enjoyable. She really did. Um, she encouraged me so much when I hadn't a notion what I was writing. She was like "Amazing idea!" and she would say the whole sentence and I'd feel so proud of myself that I'd made the sentence in English, but I could say it then in French, but she had helped me. So I, I thought like it was, it's such a beautiful language. Cause everyone says it's

Muireann



(03:13): Life, so for the Junior Cert, French and German. Um, and I really liked them, but then my school and like I got an A in both and they were, do you know, I was really good at them, but then my school wouldn't let me do both for the Leaving. So, I just did French. Um, yeah and I got like quite fluent, quite good at French. Just I went on exchanges and stuff. And then in college, then the course I was doing, you had to pick a, up as second language. So, I did Italian um, cuz I heard it's kind of easy to pick up by ear. And I feel like that's the big thing I got from going to a Gaelscoil and like speaking Irish as a kid was that I can like learn languages by ear sort-of. Like I don't even consider myself amazing at grammar or anything. I can just really pick things up from watching telly stuff. Um, so yeah. And then so sorry, French German, French, Italian, German.

Appendix 7 ~ Initial Coding



Appendix 8 ~ Thematic Map