



SECOND OR ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN IRISH-MEDIUM PRIMARY SCHOOLS: USING A UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Children in Irish-medium (or Irish immersion) primary schools have a variety of strengths, abilities, interests and needs and the Primary Language Curriculum aims to support all language learners in Irish primary schools. The potential of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to promote successful second or additional language learning, and to support teachers in planning and preparing for the inclusive teaching of Irish in immersion settings, has not received much discussion to date. The current paper aims to address this gap. Each of the three principles of the UDL framework are explored in this paper, and their relevance in the context of second or additional language learning in immersion settings is examined.

Keywords: Immersion education, Universal Design for Learning, inclusive education, second language acquisition, additional language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) may be defined as the "... study of change that takes place in the learner's L2 [second language] knowledge over time and of what brings about this change" (Ellis, 2015, p. 7). From a sociocultural perspective, such changes may appear different from learner to learner (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014) as each can have a unique Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). In acknowledging that no two learners of Irish are the same (Ní Aogáin and Ó Duibhir, 2022), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) may offer a useful framework to guide and scaffold Irish-medium (IM) classroom practice while further assisting the practical enactment of *Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* [The Primary Language Curriculum] (PLC) (NCCA, 2019) through the provision of "... flexible pathways within the learning process" (Rao and Torres, 2017, p. 462). In the current paper, IM education refers to Gaeltacht schools and immersion schools outside Gaeltacht regions. Additionally, the learning of Irish is conceived as a second or additional language, acknowledging that some children speak or use languages other than Irish at home, and that all children from 2025 will have the opportunity to learn a Modern Foreign Language in primary schools. This paper endeavours to unpack the potential of a UDL framework to support the inclusive teaching and learning of Irish in IM primary classroom settings.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN IMMERSION EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Immersion education is a form of bilingual education whereby additive bilingualism or plurilingualism is considered one of the main objectives (Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2023; Swain and Lapkin, 2005). IM primary schools account for approximately 8% of the primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Gaeleideachas, 2025), including Gaeltacht schools and schools located outside Gaeltacht regions. In Ireland, the majority of IM schools adopt an early total

immersion approach (Ó Duibhir, 2018) with the child being immersed in the Irish language for an average of two years and the formal instruction of English delayed until after the immersion period (Ní Aogáin et al., 2021). With the implementation of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (DES, 2016), primary schools located in Gaeltacht regions are required to implement the immersion period for a minimum of two years as one of the thirteen language-based criteria required to be formally recognised as a *Scoil Ghaeltachta* [Gaeltacht School].¹

¹ Second language acquisition is an established term denoting the acquisition of another language. It is acknowledged, however, that for some children this may be a third or additional language.

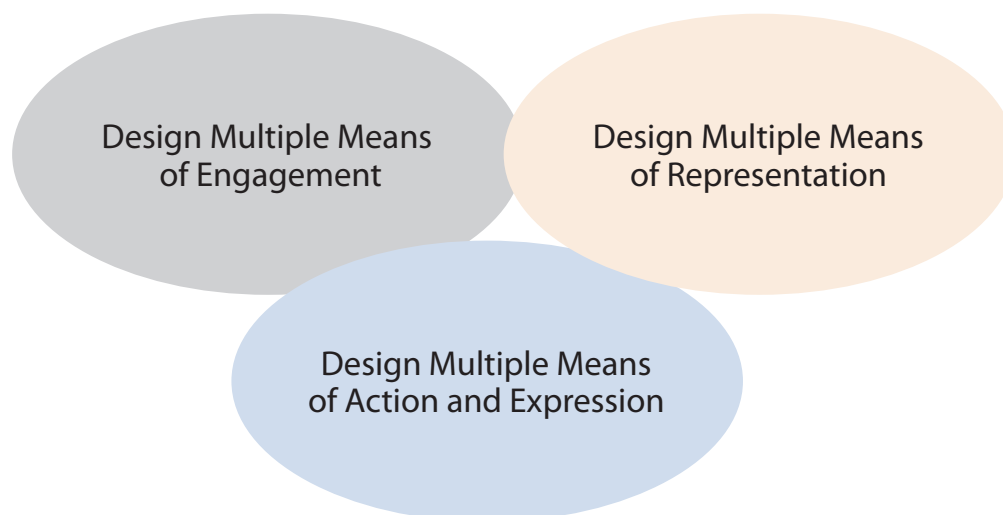
Children in IM education, like their peers, have a range of interests, strengths and needs (Nic Aindriú, 2019; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Nic Gabhann, 2008) and a whole-school inclusive approach to learning is required to support all children (Ó Duibhir et al., 2024). Second language teaching and learning in primary school settings has further developed in recent years, particularly with the publication of the PLC providing an integrated language curriculum that aims to be inclusive of all identities, learning abilities, interests and linguistic backgrounds and strives to promote the engagement of all children in the language learning process (NCCA, 2019).

The sociolinguistic context of IM education has become more complex in recent years, with a decrease in the number of children from Irish-speaking homes attending IM schools outside of the Gaeltacht between 1970-2000 (Coady and Ó Laoire, 2002). In Gaeltacht schools, children often demonstrate higher proficiency in English than Irish in certain aspects of language development (Péterváry et al., 2014), adding to the intricacies of promoting Irish as a first language in the immersion school context (Ní Shéaghdha, 2010; Thomas and Dunne, 2022). The linguistic landscape of Ireland is shifting too and there are now over 200 languages spoken or used in the Republic of Ireland (CSO, 2017). Central Statistics Office (2023) results illustrate that speakers of Irish include 13% of Polish citizens (more than 10,800 people), 13% of Latvian citizens (over 2,100 people) and 15% of Australian citizens (more than 500 people). IM education settings in Ireland, therefore, need to have robust and creative pedagogies to support the needs of different language learners (Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2023), to continue to develop literacy in the minority or minoritised language (Lauchlan et al., 2012; Rhys and Thomas, 2013) and to prepare children for the multilingual world they live in (Dunne, 2025). It may prove beneficial to consider second or additional language teaching and learning within a UDL framework to support the implementation of such pedagogies to foster language learning of all children in IM settings. A UDL approach may also support the enactment of recent recommendations by the Department of Education to embrace more inclusive practices in IM settings (Ó Duibhir et al., 2024). This aim, however, is contingent on the availability of effective Professional Development (Mac Domhnaill and Nic an Bhaird, 2022).

APPLYING UDL TO THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF IRISH IN IMMERSION SETTINGS

The UDL framework is underpinned by three overarching principles: Design Multiple Means of Engagement (the why of learning); Design Multiple Means of Representation (the what of learning) and Design Multiple Means of Action and Expression (the how of learning) (CAST.org, 2024) which are illustrated in Figure 1. UDL is considered a proactive approach for creating and providing flexible methods to teaching and learning that address learner diversity from the outset (Capp, 2020). Although UDL is gaining much attention in several areas of Irish education (Flood and Banks, 2021), and while some research highlights the clear links between the UDL framework and theories of SLA (Rao and Torres, 2017), the full potential of UDL for supporting inclusive teaching and learning of Irish in IM settings has not been explored sufficiently. By categorising second or additional language teaching and learning within the UDL framework and by including an exploration of UDL during pre-service education and during in-service professional development, IM teachers may be better supported to integrate flexibility in their practice. This may aid them in removing barriers to language learning, meeting the needs of a variety of language learners and optimising engagement by considering all learners' interests (Cook and Rao, 2018), as well as addressing some of the reported challenges in relation to the teaching of Irish (DE, 2022).²

Figure 1: The Three Principles of the UDL Framework (Adapted from: www.cast.org, 2024)



² These speakers indicated varying degrees of fluency in the language. See Press Statement Census 2022 Results Profile 8 - The Irish Language and Education - CSO - Central Statistics Office

DESIGN MULTIPLE MEANS OF ENGAGEMENT

The first principle of the UDL framework considers the importance of providing a variety of ways in which learners can engage in the learning process. Some research, such as Rao and Torres (2017), highlights that the principle, Design Multiple Means of Engagement, aligns with Krashen's concept of the 'affective filter', reemphasising the importance of ensuring language learners' filter is low (i.e., the learner is not experiencing stress, anxiety or fear and is feeling safe and ready to learn) in order to support channels for language development (Tedick and Lyster, 2020). To stimulate learners' motivation and interest, and in turn, enhance and sustain their engagement in the learning process, Courey et al. (2013) promote the use of creative, hands-on and meaningful instruction. Igniting play and joy in the learning environment and infusing both concepts in teaching and learning is a crucial component of this principle (CAST.org, 2024). In terms of practical implementation, projects that encourage children to read for pleasure in Irish, either in school or at home, have been shown to increase linguistic motivation and offer opportunities to have contact with the language even where there is no language community nearby (Dunne and Hickey, 2017; Dunne and Ní Fhaoláin, 2020). Additionally, Winter (2016) contends that it is essential to consider learners' prior knowledge and developmental readiness from the outset of the planning process and further highlights the need for such prior knowledge to be continuously developed throughout the learning process in order to foster learners' intrinsic motivation. To acknowledge and assess prior learning, a teacher may encourage learners to engage in setting their own learning goals and reflect on them through the use of activities such as, '*Tá mé in ann ... Ba mhaith liom bheith in ann ...*' [I can do ... I would like to be able to do ...] or complete column A and B in a *Cairt ABC – Ar eolas agam ... Ba mhaith liom fáil amach ... Cad a d'fhoghlaim mé ...* [known as a KWL Chart in English]³.

It is important to highlight, however, that distinctive features of engagement, from a second or additional language learning perspective, include the need for the language learning environment to be relevant to the learner's life, to cultivate a sense of belonging to the language community, and to promote positive attitudes towards the language (Harris et al., 2006). Similarly, Principle One of the UDL framework reminds us that learners must be encouraged to bring their own authentic selves to the learning environment and be supported to make connections between the learning process and their everyday lives (CAST.org, 2024). Thus, in the case of first-language speakers of Irish, opportunities for language enrichment are crucial (Coady and Ó Laoire, 2002; Ní Fhlaithearta and Ó Brolcháin, 2023; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015) which aligns with the renewed emphasis on cultivating respect for and awareness of dialects in the UDL guidelines (CAST.org, 2024). Initiatives such as *Sárchainteoirí*, where excellent speakers of the language in the community visit classrooms to share their rich knowledge of the language and model fluency (Ní Shéaghda, 2010), are examples of how such opportunities can be cultivated and fostered in the IM context. The use of digital technology and the arts have also been shown to be very effective in promoting the creative use of Irish in Gaeltacht schools (Kiely et al., 2022). Intergenerational use of Irish at home through creative and playful activities such as baking (Engman et al., 2023), or children teaching Irish to parents and other family members (O'Toole, 2023) have also been shown to increase engagement with the Irish language outside of the school context, and to sustain effort and persistence in learners' language journeys. In further widening learners' Irish-language community, IM teachers may avail of classroom activities such as *Réaltaí Gaeilge* where children are supported in conducting research on celebrities who use Irish, or *Mo Phobal Gaelach* [My Irish-Language Community] whereby children are encouraged to engage with members of their family and friends to discover their connections with and use of the Irish language (See Appendix A for some sample questions).

DESIGN MULTIPLE MEANS OF REPRESENTATION

Design Multiple Means of Representation acknowledges that learners perceive and comprehend information in different ways. The creation of learning materials that make the content accessible to the greatest number of learners (Courey et al., 2013) is fundamental to this principle. Some similarities exist between Principle Two of the UDL framework and Krashen's (1985) theory regarding comprehensible input (Rao and Torres, 2017), which maintains that learners need to receive much rich input, which is comprehensible to them and their abilities, in order to support successful SLA and development.

Building knowledge through maximising the transfer and generalisation of knowledge, within and between concepts, is paramount to the successful design and implementation of Principle Two (CAST.org., 2024). Such an understanding appears to echo that of the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) hypothesis (Cummins, 2021) whereby it is believed that language learners draw on a common proficiency and understanding of language, and that some skills can transfer to support the learning and acquisition of an additional language. Opportunities to support possible transfer of knowledge within and between learners' languages should be explicitly highlighted and explored in the language learning environment to support additive bilingualism / plurilingualism. While some

³ For a description of this activity and others mentioned in the paper, see *An Ghaeilge do gach duine. An dearadh uilloch don fhoghlaim*.

research cautions that not all concepts and skills transfer from language to language (Barnes, 2021; Barrett et al., 2020), other research in Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) propose four main areas which offer successful cross-linguistic transfer. These areas include, (i) the transfer of conceptual knowledge, (ii) the transfer of specific linguistic elements, (iii) the transfer of phonological awareness and (iv) the transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies. From a practical implementation standpoint, certain teaching and learning practices can support the transfer of conceptual knowledge, such as reinforcing the same reading comprehension strategies (Ó Cathalláin, 2011) and conventions of print in English and Irish lessons. The use of posters and visual aids in the learning environment can also further support learners in transferring conceptual knowledge and / or specific linguistic elements between languages. The use of similar graphic organisers in different language lessons may support the transfer of information from one language to another in relation to concepts such as reading and writing genres. Furthermore, availing of the same child-led assessment methods, goal-setting and reflection frameworks (e.g. *Two Stars and a Wish / Dhá Réalta agus Mian Amháin; The Feedback Sandwich / An Ceapaire Comhairle; I can do ... I would like to be able to do ... / Tá mé in ann ... Ba mhaith liom bheith in ann ...*) across languages may encourage the transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies. Multilingual activities, such as examining the names of flora and fauna in different languages, can also allow children to examine the clues about the flower for example, the size and shape of the flower, the time of year it grows, and any associated mythology contained in its name in different languages. Multilingual activities, where children discuss similarities and differences between Irish and other Welsh vocabulary, also create an awareness of connections between Celtic languages (Dunne, 2024). The handbook *Trasteangú sa Seomra Ranga* (Thomas et al., 2022) offers further guidance on using translanguaging as a pedagogical tool in language teaching.

It is important to highlight, however, the challenges observed in IM education, as documented in the latest Chief Inspector's Report (DE, 2022), particularly in relation to the introduction of subject-specific vocabulary across the curriculum. Scaffolding is an essential component of the successful implementation of Principle Two of the UDL framework to enable the learner to become 'resourceful and knowledgeable' (CAST.org, 2023) and may support the acquisition of subject-specific vocabulary in IM settings. In considering varying practical scaffolding techniques within the SLA context, a print-rich environment may prove beneficial in supporting the acquisition of subject-specific vocabulary among learners, as well as fostering their own independent language learning journey. When displaying new vocabulary in a classroom environment, it is important the language is illustrated clearly for all learners and also, in a meaningful context, authentic to the learners' lives. In embracing a UDL approach, it is crucial that new vocabulary is introduced with multiple representations, such as a visual representation (and a real-life object where possible) and oral / aural representations to support learners' comprehension (CAST.org, 2024). Furthermore, providing learners with multiple examples of the new vocabulary in varying contexts throughout the school day may support deeper understanding and provide broader access to the concept (Capp, 2020). Creative digital technologies, such as Abair.ie (Trinity College Dublin), could be availed of for learners to receive feedback on their language use and pronunciation of new vocabulary in the immersion classroom or at home (see Ní Chiaráin, 2024 for an overview of creative technologies that are being developed in Trinity College Dublin). Furthermore, learners can listen to stories / reading excerpts prior to reading themselves to support comprehension. This can be done through the use of Read Aloud functions in Microsoft Word, on websites like SoundCloud which contains audio recordings of texts from Irish-language publishers, or websites where audio and written versions of stories are available, such as Léigh Anois, Léigh Leat or Scéal an Lae produced by TG4 Foghlaim.

DESIGN MULTIPLE MEANS OF EXPRESSION

Learners differ in the manner in which they navigate their learning environment, approach their unique learning process, and express their own individual learning (CAST.org, 2024). Therefore, to ensure optimal learning and development of all, it is essential to design for and respect such varying types of action and expression which is represented in Principle Three, Design Multiple Means of Action and Expression. This principle considers the benefits of providing learners with alternative communicative approaches to engage with and to illustrate learning (Capp, 2020). Unlike the other two principles, Principle Three is focused on the learners providing evidence of their own learning. In any class, it is essential to present learners with a variety of communicative approaches to support them navigating their unique learning environment and expressing their knowledge, in a manner appropriate to their abilities (CAST.org, 2023). It is widely recognised within the SLA realm that producing linguistic output, in a manner fitting to the learner's needs and abilities, is crucial in developing a proficient language user which thus may mirror Swain's Output Hypothesis (2005).

While considering how to create Multiple Means of Action and Expression in the context of SLA, it is important that appropriate assessment methods are provided to offer flexible and varying routes for learners to illustrate their learning in a holistic manner, fitting to their needs. The Continuum of Assessments Methods (NCCA, 2007) offers a variety of modes to assure the learner's full potential is adequately assessed. While there have been developments in the range of formal assessments available for IM settings (Barnes et al., 2022; English, 2024), there remains a dearth

of assessments that take into consideration the continuum of bilingualism / plurilingualism and for which normed data is available for different profiles of speakers (Dunne, 2025). It is imperative that learners, themselves, understand their strengths and abilities and are supported in creating their own learning goals and monitoring their own success (Winter, 2016). Thus, learner-led methods such as meaningful goal setting, self-assessment and peer-assessment methods, similar to those mentioned under Principle Two, should be encouraged in Irish lessons in IM settings (Dunne, 2025).

In order to successfully pave all possible avenues to effective language learning, the provision of a suite of options as to how to express and communicate learners' new learning is important and further ensuring the availability of appropriate resources remains crucial (CAST.org, 2024). During Irish language lessons, learners may be given a choice-board of multi-media options (CAST.org, 2024) as to how to present their work, which in turn, could further optimise learners' engagement (CAST.org, 2024). For example, rather than a learner writing a review of a book, they could be given the option to present their book review in a comic strip format, or audio-record their review using digital supports such as Microsoft PowerPoint or Recorder on an iPad. Additionally, classes may create learning checklists, such as, '*Is gá dom a dhéanamh ... D'fhéadfainn a dhéanamh ...*' [I must do... I could do ...], which provides the learners with choice in what they complete, in an inclusive manner.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the general principles of UDL appear to build on understandings of best practice in SLA, are also aligned to the inclusive principles of the Primary School Curriculum and thus, should form part of pre-service education and in-service professional development for IM teachers. Examining how Irish can be taught, through the lens of the three principles of UDL, may offer practical ways to design and deliver creative and inclusive Irish-language lessons in the IM context. In order to apply UDL principles in an effective manner in IM classrooms, it is important that teachers feel competent and confident in implementing UDL in their own practices (Capp, 2020). Rather than the provision of "one-shot" (DeMonte, 2013, p. 4) professional development events, sustained professional development, which is tailored to the specific needs of the school, is required to successfully implement whole-school UDL practices. In doing so, the use of identified characteristics of effective professional development proposed by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) could be adapted to meet the needs of immersion teachers and thus, may be utilised to create effective professional development for UDL implementation. In brief, the authors maintain that UDL has the potential to support learners in their educational journey and to make a positive impact on the teaching and learning of Irish in IM settings but caution, however, that effective professional development and practical resources are needed to support the full realisation of the implementation of the UDL framework in IM schools.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Questions for *Mo Phobal Gaelach*

Is féidir leis an múinteoir agus leis an rang cúpla ceist shamplach a scríobh chun ceisteanna an agallaimh a mhúnlú don pháiste. Mar shampla:

- An bhfuil Gaeilge agat? An bhfuil aon teanga eile agat?
- Cá bhfuair tú do chuid Gaeilge?
- An úsáideann tú do chuid Gaeilge go laethúil / seachtainiúil?
- An bhfuil aithne agat ar aon duine eile a bhfuil Gaeilge acu?
- An bhfuil aithne agat ar aon duine cáiliúil a bhfuil Gaeilge acu?

I gceantair Ghaeltacht agus líonraí Gaeilge, is féidir ceisteanna breise a chur ar dhaoine, mar shampla:

- Cén leabhar Gaeilge is fearr leat?
- Cén ceoltóir Gaeilge is fearr leat?
- An bhfuil aon nath cainte i do chanúint a thaitníonn go mór leat?