

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING IRISH: A PILOT STUDY

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Table of contents

Introduction	1
Overview or background to research	1
Research focus	1
Research aim	2
Research methodology	2
Discussion and recommendations/ outcomes	9
References	12

Tables

Table 1: How I function in the Irish language classroom	6
Table 2: Activities I enjoy in Irish class	7
Table 3: Learning Irish and learning other languages	8
Table 4: Reasons for learning Irish and for learning other languages	8
Table 5: General goals in learning Irish	9
Table 6: Topic goals	9
Table 7: Feedback on self-assessment	9
Table 8: Assessments of lower-ability and of higher-ability students	10

List of acronyms and abbreviations

CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference

ELP: European Language Portfolio

Introduction

This research explores the use in the Irish language learning classroom of both the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Language Portfolio, henceforth referred to respectively as CEFR and ELP. The CEFR and ELP are used in order to engage First Year students in a process of self-assessment of their competence and progress in the learning of Irish. The research is interested in the practical considerations in adapting the CEFR and ELP for use in this particular context but, more importantly, it considers the students' experience with the processes involved and the impacts, if any, on their learning of Irish.

Overview or background to research

The CEFR and ELP complement each other well for the language learning context. In brief, the CEFR provides a set of highly comprehensive lists of statements describing a range of language competencies. The ELP operationalises a selection from these lists for goal-setting and assessment purposes in a particular context, and does so in a manner that place the learner himself/herself at the centre of that process.

The ELP emphasises the importance of language awareness and of students' awareness of themselves as active language learners. The ELP provides a structured way for students to reflect on and assess their language learning, set targets, record their progress and document their skills. The CEFR provides a set of descriptors corresponding to competencies in core language skills at six distinct levels. These descriptors emphasise the communicative role of language in a range of settings. The CEFR offers a coherent longitudinal perspective on language learning. The language skills developed and assessed at First Year, for example, are skills students will continue to develop and assess at later stages. The CEFR also offers flexibility of use for the individual learner. Within a class group some students may choose to enter at A2 level and others at A1. A student may choose to undertake A1 assessment at end of term 1 and A2 at end of year, or may choose to focus on developing stronger competences at A1 level over a given year. In addition to the longitudinal dimension, the CEFR gives attention to a full range of language skills, recognized as communicatively distinct. Textbooks traditionally have given stronger focus to writing and reading, and treatment of speaking and listening tends to focus on information content rather than manner of communication.

The ELP was selected for research primarily because of the central role played by the student in maintaining the portfolio. Second-level students are not typically involved in a systematic process of self-assessment. A premise explored in this research is that involving students in this process would enhance their awareness of themselves as language learners, and that it would also enable them to engage more productively in the language learning process.

Research focus

This report documents and discusses three distinct areas of interest

The processes involved in employing the CEFR and ELP in the Irish language classroom

The majority of young people learn Irish in the formal education system and as a second language. While there are diverse practices within the classroom, textbooks and exam preparation have a central role. The CEFR and ELP offer distinct perspectives and approaches to the process of language learning and, as such, pose some challenges for more conventional classroom practice and organisation. The adaptations made of CEFR/ELP templates within this study are outlined in the following section; the challenges posed are discussed more thoroughly in the overall evaluation.

Students' experience with the assessment model

The student is central in two distinct ways to this research. As with any pedagogical research, their experience with the programme and any effects of the programme on them are of natural interest. However, in the present study student engagement with the programme is an intrinsic feature of the programme itself. Apart then from considering the findings in terms of any impacts on the students, the research is interested also in analysing the quality of student engagement with the programme.

An overall evaluation of the experience from a pedagogical and language learning perspective

This evaluation is informed in part by findings regarding the students' experiences but the evaluation also considers possible implications for a teacher in the delivery of the programme.

Student Profile

The students comprised a full class body, normally taught by the researcher, a total of 17 First Year students in an all-boys English speaking secondary school. The students were aged between 12 and 13. The class was mixed ability. None of the students had attended a Gaelscoil. The school in question draws students from a particularly wide catchment area, and none of the students had attended the same primary school. This is likely, in part, to have been a factor in the wide variety of experiences with Irish in school, such as differences in the amount of time spent with Irish, the practice of speaking Irish in the classroom and the levels of language complexity addressed. While such matters were not formally examined in the research, the researcher (as class teacher) had been struck from early in the year with the particularly wide range in ability in Irish and the strong negative attitudes expressed by some students with regard to Irish. Some of these attitudes are evident in an attitude form completed by students, which will be examined in *Findings*.

Research aim

The overall aim of this research is to use a small-scale study to explore the students' experience with self-assessment on two fronts: their experience with the actual process of self-assessment and the effect, if any, on their language learning in Irish.

Research methodology

The basic principles of the portfolio and self-assessment were discussed with the class at the end of the first term. Work with the research commenced at the beginning of the second term and ran till the end of the academic year. Excluding classes lost for various reasons, this amounted to a total of 13-14 weeks.

The class had five 40 minute classes a week. Actual class time was frequently shorter due to factors such as the nature and location of classes held prior to the class or whether the class itself was just before lunch. Within the actual time-slot it proved quite challenging to satisfactorily complete some of the planned activities and to integrate portfolio work into normal class routines.

Activities by and large meant a significant change from routine classroom work. Students were involved much more in paired and group work or team games. The focus of work in language tasks was frequently on areas not given strong attention with First Year students, either by the researcher or textbooks, e.g. spelling – an activity focusing on vowel clusters, speaking – a focus on the use of discourse markers and fillers, listening – a focus on pronunciation of phrases. The benefits and challenges in such changes to routine practice are discussed further in the section, *Findings*.

Data Collection

Students formally assessed their competencies in the four language areas (speaking, writing, listening, reading) twice. Two students were absent for the second assessment of listening competencies. Profile forms were completed over the first few weeks of the programme and a brief assessment form filled in at the programme end. The forms were in Irish but competence descriptors and statements to be rated were translated in English, in smaller font, in order to facilitate accurate understanding by student.

Findings

1. Profile as Language Learner

Assessment: How I function in the Irish language classroom

Students were asked to rate eight statements as descriptions of themselves in the Irish class.

n= 16	Describes me well	A fair description of me	Does not describe me well	Unsure how well this describes me
I know what the class is working on	8	8	0	0
I understand the teacher	7	8	1	0
I know when I don't understand something	11	3	1	0
I ask the teacher questions when I need to	7	8	1	0
I can write good notes from the board	5	9	2	1
I understand the teacher's directions	7	5	1	1
I can keep focus on the task at hand	6	9	1	0
I'm good at noticing things about languages	3	6	4	3

Table 1: *How I function in the Irish language classroom*

Students identified to a greater or lesser extent with all statements, *does not describe me well* is ticked 11 of a possible 104 times and *uncertainty* selected just 5 times. It is very likely this reflects in part a desire to express or identify with statements perceived to be positive. From the researcher's own knowledge of the students, assessments were overly positive in many cases. Two examples: it is the researcher's opinion that many learners do *not* often know in class when they don't understand something, an understanding more generally prompted through testing, but this statement received the strongest positive score. The particular students who strongly identified with *I'm good at noticing things about languages* rarely gave strong evidence for this trait in class, though two other students did. This caveat sounded, it is interesting to note the most balanced spread of ratings was for that particular statement. There is clear evidence that being good at noticing features about languages is of benefit in language learning and yet it is an area not given much specific attention in textbooks or, indeed, in exams. In summary, then, due to the bias in this survey it was decided it would not be valid to assert correlations between these and other findings.

2. Activities enjoyed

n=15	First Choice	Second choice	Third choice	Totals
Group work	5	1	2	8
Computer work	4	2	2	8
Paired work	2	1	3	6
Talking activities	2	2	1	5
Working with games	1	2	4	7
Reading stories	0	4	1	5
Writing activities	0	2	1	3
Listening activities	1	0	0	1
Textbook work	0	1	0	1
Teacher exploration	0	0	1	1

Table 2: *Activities I enjoy in Irish class*

Students were not asked to give reasons for their selections so comments are, to some degree, speculative. 80% of students' first choices were for general activities (working with groups, pairs, computers and games). The focus of activities (language skills, textbook, exposition) appears overall of less importance than the manner of engagement. The preferences for working *with* others, for games and computer work, are not surprising and group or paired task activities are common in language learning courses. They are not, perhaps, so common in the school environment for a number of reasons: shorter class periods, textbook design, the practice of teaching to the exam. With a minority language, in particular, there are significantly less high quality language-learning materials available for computers or online. The researcher was concerned with making much of the language learning interactive and enjoyable, design of these activities and adaptation of texts required a significant amount of preparation and time.

3. Comparison: Irish and other languages

n=17	Other language	Irish	Same	Unsure
Grammar simpler	10	3	4	0
Spelling simpler	10	3	1	3
Class level easier	9	2	5	1
Pronunciation simpler	8	5	3	0
Vocabulary learning easier	8	3	3	3
Easier to construct sentences	8	3	4	2
More like English	9	2	1	5
Heard more	3	11	3	0

Table 3: *Learning Irish and learning other languages*

n=17	Strongest First Choice		Strongest Second Choice	
Irish	- Have to	8	- Have to	3 each
			- Useful	
Other language	- Have to - Fun - Interesting	3 each	- Cultural	4
			- Love language	
			(Have to = 0)	

Table 4: *Reasons for learning Irish and for learning other language*

Tables 4 and 5 reflect a negativity towards Irish which has been more extensively documented. In all, 11 out of 17 selected 'have to' as their first or second reason for learning Irish, in comparison to just 3 who selected this reason for learning their other language. Irish is seen to be more difficult in all aspects, with even pronunciation rather surprisingly seen to be easier. It is important to note there may be a gender bias also at play in these results, and also that the material covered in the other language classes was likely to have been more basic.

Negative perceptions with regard to the language and learning the language are important to acknowledge. While pedagogical practice may not be the sole or the most significant factor in these perceptions, there is certainly a case to be made for exploring the need for substantive reform in this area. On the other hand, negativity can counter the potential effect of new initiatives. An underlying resentment because of the compulsion to learn Irish might need to be addressed in wider context.

4. General goals

n=16	Choice no. 1	Choice no. 2	Choice no. 3	Choice no 4 or 5
Vocabulary	8	1	4	3
Conversation	4	1	1	10
Talking	0	6	2	8
Listening	1	3	0	12
Spelling	1	1	4	11
Reading	1	1	2	12
Pronunciation	1	1	2	12
Writing	0	2	2	12

Table 5: *General goals in Irish*

It is interesting that *increasing vocabulary* (a more restricted goal, also more easily achieved and measured) features more highly on this and other goal-setting forms than the skills involved in vocabulary use.

5. Topic Goals

At the beginning of work on a new topic, students were asked to select in order their top three areas for improvement from a list of eight. As work on each topic naturally prompted production of certain grammatical constructions, these were given focus in class and grammar thus features on this list.

n=16	Choices in order			Choices in order			Choices in order		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Vocabulary	5	1	1	5	0	1	8	2	0
Conversation	3	4	5	2	2	0	3	4	2
Talking	2	3	3	2	4	3	0	0	3
Listening	1	2	1	1	5	3	3	4	2
Grammar	1	4	3	4	0	2	1	2	2
Spelling	2	1	2	0	2	3	3	1	4
Reading	2	0	1	2	1	3	0	0	2
Writing	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	3	1

Table 6: *Topic goals*

The interest in vocabulary learning has been remarked on. Otherwise, higher interest in conversation/talking than reading/writing is noted, along with increased interest in listening for Topics 2 and 3. It is not possible to draw conclusions from the small data set but it would be interesting to explore if such patterns are consistent within a communicative approach.

6 Feedback on portfolio use

Students filed material in their portfolios regularly and, at period intervals, completed a self-assessment form using portfolio material to assist them. Not surprisingly, they required a lot of support in doing this. Assessments statements were read through and commented on. Students were then directed to work done by them, and commented on by me, which would support and guide their self-assessment

From doing this work a number of times with students, and from the comments made on their feedback form, the following observations can be made.

- The portfolios had a somewhat marginal existence for students in their language learning. In part, this may have been due to the fact that the portfolios were kept in the classroom and were only brought out at intervals, sometimes too infrequently.
- Recognising the distinct and complementary roles of copybook work and portfolio work was not easy for some. Several commented they found managing handouts and learning from them difficult.

7. Feedback on Self-Assessment

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Easy to assess self	1	0	5	7	3
Didn't make quick decisions	1	3	6	5	1
Didn't select same levels	3	5	11	4	3
Found assessing my work interesting	1	6	3	5	2
Helped thing about language skills	3	3	7	1	3
Help clarify areas for focus	1	2	3	4	5
Teacher's assessment helpful		2	4	6	4
Would like to continue	3	6	1	2	5

Table 7: *Feedback on self-assessment*

These forms employed mixed positive and negative statements, in an attempt to verify consistencies in answers. It is clear from comments and conflicting answers that some students were not always clear about the rating of mixed sentences. The following observations can be made.

- It was clear to the researcher that some students did have difficulty in assessing themselves, indeed, one might have expected this. Ticking boxes can be seen as undemanding, and some may have not been overly-concerned with the accuracy of their assessment. At a certain stage the research introduced some changes in order to monitor and assist students in their assessment, described in the following section.
- Students were split evenly on how interesting they found self-assessment. This is encouraging, for a programme not experienced by students before, where practical matters created some difficulty and one where procedures, activities and materials were being modified as required. Only slightly more indicated they would not be interested in continuing portfolio work.
- It is unsurprising, but nevertheless important to note students were more positive on the benefits for goal-setting than for more general language learning skills. Students had regular practice with goal-setting, they engaged with this at the start of the programme and for each of the three topics. Regarding language learning skills, it can be a mistake to assume students have an understanding of what these are, and it is argued there is a role for the teacher in developing this awareness.

Self-Assessment

Comparative analysis was carried out on assessment across the four language skills. Again, it is unsurprising that reading and writing competencies were overall assessed as higher than those for listening and speaking. Reading and writing typically are given more attention in the classroom. In addition, it is likely that some students found it easier to assess their competencies in these areas than in listening and speaking, where ‘on-line’ speech is used with its distinct characteristics.

Comparison was also carried out between three of the weakest and strongest students (students who consistently got a low C or under in classwork, and those who consistently got a B or higher.)

Stuents	Low proficiency statements	High proficiency statements
Lower ability	46%	8%
Higher ability	9%	59%

Table 8: *Assessments by lower ability and higher ability students*

It is interesting that, despite the large disparity in language proficiency, assessments of both low proficiency and high proficiency students appear to be a reasonable reflection of their actual language competencies. Having lower proficiency levels does not necessarily mean one will have difficulties in making realistic judgements about that level.

Discussion and recommendations/outcomes

This research was concerned with three particular areas.

Processes involved in employing the CEFR and ELP in the Irish language classroom

Considerable planning and preparation was involved in adapting the CEFR/ELP for use in the second-level classroom, with adaptation happening on an ongoing basis. This work was inevitable given that materials for the particular context (second-level students of Irish) had not been developed. On a positive note, the CEFR/ELP was found to be very flexible and easy to adapt. The role of the teacher in implementing the portfolio is an aspect deserving of more attention, specifically in developing an understanding of self-assessment and supporting the development of relevant skills

Students' experience with this assessment model

As mentioned, some students found self-assessment to be difficult and some did not give it the degree of required care. To address this, rather than leaving assessment of a skill until a fair body of work had been done, it was decided to link assessment more closely to a significant piece of work (either an assignment of some kind or a test). Within the test itself students, for example, students were asked periodically to assess their confidence with a given answer. In addition, the researcher started to give written feedback on each student's self-assessment, for example by ticking in a different colour the competence level the teacher judged demonstrated by the student's work, or by an overall comment as to the student's accuracy in self-assessment

The research thus highlights the support needed by students to enable them, with experience, to *learn* how to become competent in self-assessment. It was noted, for example, that the teacher might have to be more actively involved in monitoring students' self-assessment.

An overall evaluation from a pedagogical and language learning perspective

A distinct pedagogical approach was demanded by this programme, integrating self-assessment on a range of language skills. Activities employed were underpinned by concerns to develop communicative competence and awareness of linguistic structures, characteristics of language in use. In addition, there was a concern with developing an understanding of *themselves* as active agents in the acquisition process. Again, this reinforces a central learning that CEFR/ELP provides an impressive template for self-assessment, one built on very solid language learning principles, but integrating the CEFR/ELP into the second-level classroom entails very careful consideration of the challenges this poses.

Perhaps one of the most significant measures that might be addressed to promote self-assessment in the Irish language learning lies with the proposed new Junior Certificate programme, where language portfolios might be awarded marks. Such a measure would, in turn, prompt the development of required resources: textbooks giving attention to a wider range of communicative competencies, to language assessment skills, providing a wider range of audio materials and developing portfolio workbooks. This would help self-assessment to become an integral part of language learning, and not an optional add-on.

Conclusion

This research was short-term and involved a small number of participants, all boys. Notwithstanding these limitations, and the difficulties encountered with aspects of the programme, much of interest emerged from the research. CEFR/ELP appear to offer a valuable resource with regard to self-assessment, in particular, and language learning more generally. They are not tailor-make solutions and that is part of their value. Positive use entails consideration of the local context: the communicative needs, the language and the learners.

References

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