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The role of texts, including literature, in supporting the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

A composite report comprising:

- Perspectives from teachers and students
- Academic article

2025

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Introduction

Historically, the teaching and learning of Irish has adopted an approach that integrates language and literature. Texts play a crucial role in this approach by exposing students to diverse vocabulary, grammatical structures and cultural contexts. Exposure to such a variety of texts, it is considered, supports the development of students' reading, writing, listening, speaking and interacting abilities which are essential for language acquisition and development. However, the integrated language and literature approach has been the subject of much debate amongst stakeholders. In response, the NCCA have compiled this exploration of the role of texts, including literature, in supporting the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish to support discussions regarding the redevelopment of senior cycle Irish as part of Tranche 4.

This composite report contributes to the ongoing conversation on the role of texts, including literature, in the teaching, learning and assessment of the Irish language in post-primary schools. It explores the issues through student voice, teacher perspectives and academic research in four sections:

- Background
- Recent amendments relating to texts at junior cycle and senior cycle
- Perspectives from teachers and students
- Academic article:
Múineadh na litríochta Gaeilge ag an iarbhunleibhéal: Cad chuige agus cur chuige / The Why and How of Teaching Irish Literature Texts at Post-primary Level

Background

In response to the [Early Enactment Review of Junior Cycle Irish T1 & T2](#) (Mac Gearailt & Ó Duibhir, 2023) NCCA committed to undertake research on the role of texts, including literature, in supporting the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish in post-primary schools. Consequently, in 2024, NCCA commissioned Professor Muiris Ó Laoire to research the role of texts, both literary and non-literary, in the Irish language classroom. The research draws on international best practice and shares a range of methodologies and practical strategies to support the use of texts in the post-primary classroom. It is bolstered by an appendix which shares practical suggestions for exploring and teaching texts in such settings and it is accompanied by a [podcast](#) with the author to further support and inspire professional conversations on learning through the medium of Irish.

Recent amendments relating to texts at junior cycle and senior cycle

In 2023, in response to the [Early Enactment Review of Junior Cycle Irish T1 & T2](#) and as per [Circular 0015/2023](#), the Junior Cycle specifications were amended to reduce the volume of literary texts that students engage with, in order to increase the time available to focus on the development of students' oral and oracy skills.

NCCA Council also prioritised a follow-up early enactment review of the Junior Cycle Irish specifications and SEALBHÚ, the DCU Research Centre for the Learning and Teaching of Irish,

commenced work on a [longitudinal study](#) in September 2023. NCCA is cognisant that themes relating to texts may emerge from SEALBHÚ's work.

In 2023-24 the NCCA executive worked with Text List Review Groups to review junior cycle T1 & T2 texts. This review resulted in the removal of texts that were proving difficult to source and the addition of new, more recently published material.

In November 2024 a revised literature list was issued for Irish students commencing 1st year in September 2025. Additionally, revised prescribed material for 2nd and 3rd year students was issued in [Circular 0086/2024](#). These prescribed materials will be examined from 2027.

Texts came to the fore again in the Consultation Report on the [Draft T1 and T2 Specifications for Leaving Certificate Irish](#) (NCCA 2023). In response, and as per [Circular 0070/2024](#), the prescribed texts for Leaving Certificate Irish from September 2025 have been updated for the first time since 2010.

Perspectives from teachers and students

Introduction

Eight school visits were conducted to gain insights into the 'lived experience' of texts in Irish language classrooms. An expression of interest (EOI) was issued to all schools in September 2024 and a representative sample was selected from the 99 schools that expressed an interest in becoming involved in the research on the role of texts in supporting teaching, learning and assessment in the Irish post-primary classroom.

Four T1 and four T2 schools were selected using criteria relating to DEIS status, gender, school size and type. Visits to these schools took place in October and November 2024 and involved focus group meetings with 137 students (68 in a T1 setting, 69 in a T2 setting) and 46 teachers of Irish (18 in a T1 setting, 28 in a T2 setting).

The views of An Gréasán do Mhúinteoirí Gaeilge were gathered through an online focus group with two teachers from a T1 setting and three teachers from a T2 setting.

The following section provides an overview of the insights gathered.

A number of topics in relation to texts were discussed with teachers:

- interpretation of the term 'text'
- challenges and opportunities associated with texts
- text choice
- additional supportive texts, teaching strategies and methodologies
- oral and oracy skills
- formative and summative assessment
- technology in the classroom.

Student focus groups gave students in junior and senior cycle the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences in relation to:

- favourite genres
- vocabulary development

- creating texts (oral and written)
- using Irish in and beyond the school setting
- the role of technology in the Irish language classroom.

Insights

Texts: Interpretation of the term

Teacher interpretation of the term 'text' varied across the schools visited. Some equated the term exclusively with the written word, e.g. short stories, novels and poetry, while others interpreted the term more broadly to include drama, song, film and oral folklore. In some focus groups, teachers referred to news clips, magazine articles, speeches, transcriptions from audio and blog entries as texts also.

Student interpretation of the term 'text' also varied. Some students considered texts as books written in Irish, but not necessarily for the purpose of learning the language at post-primary level. With regard to student generated texts, it was noteworthy that some students referred to 'aiste a scríobh' or 'writing an essay' irrespective of the task assigned. Overall the focus groups revealed a wide variety of student created texts such as: blogs, text analysis, character sketches, film/book reviews, diary entries, debates and rap lyrics. Some students in both T1 & T2 settings spoke about scripting role-plays and short plays, while a small number recalled being tasked with recording audio pieces through Irish.

Texts suggested by teachers for future consideration included speeches, news items and podcasts to expose students to the language being used in authentic settings which could increase engagement and motivation. Additionally, some teachers commented that a number of current texts tend to explore dark and depressing themes and expressed a wish for themes which are more applicable to teenagers and young adults. Some teachers (T1) commented that literary classics, such as the work of Pádraic Ó Conaire, must be retained and that students could potentially study a modern and traditional version of each genre to help develop their understanding of how literature develops and evolves.

There is so much stuff on line now, for example TG4 and Molscéal, that we should be focusing on.

(Teacher, T2 focus group)

It's difficult to progress from very simple Irish without the help of texts.

(Student, T2 focus group)

Both teachers and students alike referenced the importance of enjoying the texts explored and studied:

When the teacher is inspired, the student is inspired.

(Teacher, T1 focus group).

Challenges and opportunities

Teachers recognised the value of literary studies and the opportunities which texts present to expose students to the language on a variety of topics in a range of formats/genres. In doing so however, many felt that the language of the texts was often very academic and not reflective of the spoken vernacular of the students. Teachers highlighted the need to build background

knowledge and vocabulary to provide students with a foundation to support them in their thinking, talking and writing about the content and themes arising from the texts.

Many texts have an emphasis on academic language rather than the language of communication. Students regularly don't see their own language in the texts but rather 'the language of books.'

(Teacher, T1 focus group)

While teachers welcomed the reduction in junior cycle texts (from September 2023), they spoke consistently about the time pressures to teach the course at both junior and senior cycle. When asked about incorporating additional supportive texts one teacher commented:

There isn't a lot of time to draw on additional texts.

(Teacher, T1 focus group)

Students were also keenly aware of time pressures, with one student stating:

If you miss a class in Irish, you miss a lot.

(Senior cycle student, T2 focus group)

Where additional supportive texts were used, teachers referenced publications from Gael Linn such as Dréimire and Staighre. News items from Tuairisc and resources from TG4 Foghlaim were welcomed by teachers to support conversations about current affairs in their lessons. Websites such as Snas (formerly Vifax), An Tairseach, Nuacht RTÉ and Molscéal were also mentioned regularly. Teachers working in T2 settings highlighted the importance of having access to content which features teenagers speaking Irish to support and inspire their students who do not have contact with the language community locally. Some teachers (T1) spoke about book clubs (e.g. COGG Club Leabhar initiative) while others (T1 & T2) invited authors / writers in residence to their schools to facilitate creative writing workshops.

In the main, students expressed a strong preference for films, novels and short stories. Some students were frustrated by studying excerpts, as they felt they only learned a limited amount about the characters and storyline. The time allocated to studying a text appeared to have an impact, with students pointing out that films, novels and short stories afforded them the opportunity to spend time with the text, witness the plot unfold and observe how characters develop. While some stated that they enjoy drama, others found studying plays more challenging, especially when the play was studied in isolation from seeing it acted out on stage. A number of teachers in both T1 & T2 settings said that an increase in the number of audiobooks available would be beneficial.

While it was widely recognised that texts help forge connections with the past and our rich cultural heritage, many teachers reiterated the importance of including more modern texts which feature teenage and young adult characters. This was in keeping with student feedback also.

<i>Every text should draw in every learner.</i>	<i>The folklore is important but there are better opportunities to connect literature with the life of the student..</i>	<i>The Irish texts should be more up to date and relate to the real world.</i>
(Teacher, T1 focus group)	(Teacher, T2 focus group)	(Student, T2 focus group).

Many students recommended the inclusion of texts which deal with controversial, emotional and emotive topics. A recurring theme in the focus groups was the need for a reduction in the number of texts studied and a yearning for more variety as students considered many texts to be similar in nature.

There are too many texts to do at the moment.

It would be better to do one text from each genre and spend more time on them.

It is difficult to differentiate between some of the texts as they are very similar to each other.

(Student perspectives, T1 focus groups)

Teachers acknowledged the links between texts and CBA 1. They also referred to the option for students to incorporate texts into their CBA 2 work, although students expressed a preference to choose a topic of personal interest to them rather than drawing on a text studied in 2nd/3rd year.

Teachers commented that texts, especially films, act as a catalyst for conversation in the classroom at all stages from first to sixth year. It was widely acknowledged that texts help students to expand their vocabulary and present teachers with opportunities to introduce, revisit or reiterate grammar rules in context. Some teachers mentioned that certain texts resulted in class debates, while others supported and inspired groupwork sessions. Where audiobooks were used, teachers valued having an alternative way to 'read' novels and all the while enhance student listening skills. Certain texts also led to discussions around dialects and the variations which are unique to each one. However, some T1 teachers commented that there was a shortage of texts and audiobooks to support individual dialects.

A small minority of teachers believed that the teaching of Irish should not involve literature and some students mentioned the absence of literature in modern foreign language classrooms. Teachers considered the absence of literature based questions on the final ordinary level junior cycle exam to have a negative backwash effect in terms of application of knowledge and student motivation.

Choice

Opinions relating to text choice varied. At junior cycle a majority of teachers welcomed the breadth of the recommended 1st year text list and the 2nd and 3rd year prescribed text list. Some teachers however felt that the choice was too vast and they struggled to find the time to read all the texts to help identify which ones suit their context best. Meanwhile a number of schools, where a book scheme was in operation, stated that sets of specific texts were purchased thus limiting their choice, year on year.

The senior cycle Irish syllabus offers two prose options at both ordinary and higher level:

- (1) Prós comónta ainmnithe/Common prescribed prose
- or

- (2) Prós: Ábhar roghnach/Prose: optional/elective content

Similarly, the senior cycle syllabus offers two poetry options:

- (1) Filíocht chomónta ainmnithe/Common prescribed poetry
or
(2) Filíocht: Ábhar roghnach/Poetry: optional/elective content

When asked about the cúrsa roghnach/optional course at senior cycle teachers in each focus group believed that providing an alternative to the prescribed prose and poetry was important. That said, none of the teachers participating in the focus groups had opted to implement the optional/elective course. Some teachers highlighted that having an alternative option was essential, especially in an academic year which introduces updated prescribed texts. This option facilitates and supports students who, for a myriad of reasons, repeat their leaving certificate Irish exam. Other teachers referred to colleagues who opted for the cúrsa roghnach in response to the varying interests and needs of their students. It was acknowledged that the cúrsa roghnach also offers flexibility for external and mature candidates studying texts for the leaving certificate Irish exam. Some teachers believed that a list of texts for the cúrsa roghnach section would be useful.

Concerns

Teachers acknowledged the complex and varying nature of T1 settings: Gaeltacht schools, Gaelcholáistí, Aonaid (units) and Sruthanna (streams). Not all students attending a T1 setting use the Irish language at home or in the local community. Not all students in a T1 post-primary setting attended a Gaelscoil (T1 primary setting). Teachers expressed concern about covering a set amount of texts, especially in first year, rather than focusing on building oral skills to support students in contexts where Irish is the language of instruction and communication across the curriculum.

Teachers in T2 settings also referred to challenges arising at transition points. They expressed concerns regarding the varying amounts of Irish acquired by students in primary school and the time required to identify the gaps in their learning while progressing with the post-primary curriculum.

There is an understanding that students have good Irish or some standard of it when they enter first year, but this is not the case for every student. There are gaps. They have to start from the beginning.

(Teacher, T2 focus group)

A number of teachers highlighted the challenges of differentiating work for students entering first year from a Gaelscoil (T1 primary setting) and students entering post-primary from a T2 setting. Some students commented that mixed ability settings resulted in a heightened awareness of their language ability.

Irish is taught like as if it is English, as if you already know it conversationally. We don't though.

(Student, T2 focus group)

Some teachers working in a Gaelcholáiste setting outside the Gaeltacht spoke about the challenges of connecting with the pobal teanga (language community) where no such external supports exist locally.

Frustration was expressed with regard to developing notes, resources and activities as a number of teachers (T1) believe that textbooks are not tailored to the needs of students in T1 settings and in particular those in Gaeltacht based contexts.

Contact with the language

Some teachers (T2) expressed concerns regarding timetabling and the knock-on effect of students not having Irish classes on a daily basis. While those working in T1 contexts acknowledged the level of fluency which their students develop, in part due to their exposure to the language across the curriculum, those working in a T2 setting were more acutely aware of the impact which non-daily contact with the language can have on students. Additionally, in some of the schools visited, teachers did not have a base classroom for building a language rich environment or displaying student work in.

When asked about their contact with the Irish language outside of school, student responses varied greatly. While some students speak Irish at home and in their local community, a majority of students across all focus groups said that they do not use Irish outside of the school context. Some students mentioned listening to Irish language radio stations at home or in the car. A large number of students watch sporting events on TG4, although some admitted that they found the commentary challenging to understand at times. None of the students who took part in the focus groups mentioned reading Irish texts, of their own choosing, for pleasure.

A number of teachers welcomed the increased prevalence of Irish language advertising in the media and across social media platforms.

Assessment

Teachers shared insights about a wide variety of tasks they used to support both formative and summative assessment. Tasks ranged from vocabulary tests (orally/on mini-whiteboards), designing multimodal posters to depict the events of a text and role plays, to more traditional written assignments. Many teachers commented on the influence of the State exams on their practice. Developing comprehension and writing skills to support text-based questions was considered time consuming and many believed that it detracted from developing other skills, e.g. oracy skills. While choice featured in class assessments teachers expressed frustration that the final junior cycle exam offered no question choice to students. Some teachers believed that the nature of text-based questions asked of junior cycle students was, at times, more challenging than leaving certificate questions.

The standard of the questions is more challenging on the exam for the JC, for example, writing an alternate ending for the text. Sometimes the student does not understand the keywords of the questions. Sometimes they are more difficult than the questions of the Leaving Certificate.

(Teacher, T1 focus group)

As an alternative to written term tests, some teachers, in one T1 focus group, assigned projects and podcasts to their students. Students were given the option to work individually or in pairs to research, draft and record their work for submission. Other teacher focus groups (T1 & T2) mentioned short format, TikTok style, videos as a form of assessment, while some used audio only voice notes.

Teaching methodologies and strategies

Methodologies and strategies used vary depending on the context of the class, some that came in for mention included: using word walls, mini white boards, activity work sheets, paired reading tasks, picture sequences, gallery walks, debates, group discussions, peer assessment and role play/drama.

There is a chance that there are students in the class with dyslexia or learning difficulties, so you change the strategies. There are students who learn well actively, not visually. So, yes, you change things.

It depends on the students in front of you. It depends on their ability. With a strong group, you would be able to describe themes, images, etc. With a weak class, scaffolding is necessary.

(Teachers, T2 focus groups)

Students in general enjoy group work and recognise the value of having an opportunity to use newly acquired vocabulary and phrases with their peers to consolidate the learning. On the topic of group work and class discussions, some students remarked:

New words stay with you.

(Junior cycle student, T1 focus group)

A week ago we were doing a sample answer and I noticed that I was using new words from the text. They slip in without you even realising it sometimes.

(Senior cycle student, T1 focus group)

Almost all students expressed a like for active learning experiences. Some students spoke enthusiastically about pair work and activities such as scripting and engaging in role-play, while other students felt there was a huge emphasis on the written word which left little, or in some cases, no time for group work/oral work during class.

Some teachers spoke about informal learning opportunities which arose from mentoring PME students who generously shared new strategies and approaches with them while on placement. A majority of teachers said they would welcome more discipline specific professional development opportunities to keep up to date with emerging teaching methodologies to support integrating literary and non-literary texts into language teaching practices.

Oral work and oracy skills

Teachers in T1 & T2 settings shared a range of activities used to support the development of oracy skills, e.g. pair/group work, read aloud tasks, presentations, in-character role plays, speeches and debates. A few teachers highlighted the importance of seating arrangements to help facilitate group activities with minimum disruption. In a number of T2 settings, lunchtime options such as *tae agus plé*, *ciorcal comhrá* and *Gaelbhratach* activities gave students the opportunity to speak Irish with their peers. A number of teachers referred to the motivating impact of seasonal events (e.g.: Seachtain na Gaeilge, Gaeilge 24) and competitions (e.g.: Gael Linn Abair) which promote the Irish language. Teachers in both T1 & T2 settings commented on the importance of encouraging informal comhrá/conversation at the start of every class to build confidence and fluency. Teachers acknowledged that some approaches to encourage oral work, such as composing poems or song lyrics, may appeal to one class group but prove challenging for another.

Teachers in T1 settings regularly spoke about the importance of making language connections across the curriculum.

Many teachers in the T2 focus groups commented that finding time for oral work proved difficult due to the time invested in reading, exploring and analysing literary texts with their students. A majority of teachers said that it was difficult to find time to assess student oral work on an individual basis. Although students enjoy groupwork activities, teachers were conscious that not all students contribute orally, even in small group settings.

A number of T2 students expressed concern regarding their ability to have an informal conversation in Irish. Rote learning was mentioned on a number of occasions, with some students commenting:

I can tell you about the theme of the poem, but I can't hold a conversation with you.

I think the whole course is rote learning. We are given the paragraph and told to learn it. It's the same with the sraith pictiúr. We are given the 6 paragraphs by the teacher. I don't want to just learn off something, I want to be able to understand it.

(Senior cycle students, T2 focus group)

Active learning, student engagement and real-world application of knowledge was important for teachers and students alike. Some teachers spoke about the role of questioning and the use of Bloom's taxonomy to support recall and critical thinking. Teachers mentioned the importance of giving both peer and teacher feedback orally to support language acquisition and development. Feedback was also considered invaluable in building student confidence. In some T1 focus groups teachers mentioned a whole-school approach to expanding student vocabulary and improving accuracy through initiatives such as *nath na seachtaine* (phrase of the week) or *seanfhocal na seachtaine* (proverb of the week).

Junior cycle students have the option of incorporating texts studied in 2nd/3rd year into their CBA 2 project, however a majority of students expressed a preference for choosing a topic of personal interest to them instead.

Technology

When asked about the use and role of technology to support the teaching of texts, teacher responses varied greatly. In some cases, access to technology was not an option. Elsewhere, access was dependent on booking a computer room or a trolley of devices which caused frustration as computers/tablets often required maintenance. In some schools, concerns such as unreliable Wi-Fi and limited access to websites due to internet firewalls were raised. Mobile phone use was permitted in some of the schools visited, while others had restricted access policies in place.

Where technology was incorporated into lessons students enjoyed the variety which websites and apps brought to their learning experience. Some teachers commented that it is difficult to make spelling and grammar exercises enjoyable, however, some believed that apps, such as *Kahoot*, can be used to good effect to motivate learners.

Students found quizzes and multiple-choice questions beneficial especially when used for revision purposes. In some focus groups students mentioned the benefit of having access to virtual

learning environments (e.g.: Teams/Google Class etc.) where teachers shared content from class. A small number of students also found it useful to have an online forum for asking questions about classwork/homework. Some teachers spoke about the positive impact that recording pieces of audio had on boosting student confidence.

The majority of students spoke positively about online dictionaries, however some stated that they found them challenging to use at times, e.g. when a simple search resulted in multiple options to choose from, they often selected the incorrect term resulting in the need for repeat searches. A small number of students said they would appreciate guidance on the use of online dictionaries to better support them with classwork and homework.

The Why and How of Teaching Irish Literature Texts at Post-primary Level

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Commissioned by the
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1. Introduction

This discussion paper provides a definition of a literary text and discusses the educational reasons that literature is recommended to be explored in the Irish-language class at post-primary level. In addition, there is a brief reflection on the assessment of literature. In the appendix is an explication of suggested approaches in which literary texts could be integrated with the development of language skills in the Irish-language class.

2. Literature on the post-primary Irish-language syllabus programme

Since Irish was first taught in post-primary schools, literary texts were always part of the syllabus, and from the beginning, teachers tried to put the most suitable literary texts for students on the syllabus. The most remarkable thing about the literature programme on the post-primary Irish-language syllabus in the early years of the State (it was announced in 1927 that Irish would be compulsory on the post-primary school curriculum) was how much freedom teachers had to choose the most suitable literary texts for their own schools (Ó Laoire, 1994; 2002). Gradually, teachers began to demand set prose and poetry texts; and from 1941 onwards, only set texts were on the programme. The same syllabus was implemented in Gaeltacht schools and in schools outside of the Gaeltacht. Just as English-language literature was an integral part of that syllabus under the influence of classical studies, it was assumed that Irish-language literary texts would be the fabric of the teaching of Irish.

Following free post-primary education in the late sixties, questions were gradually being raised about the suitability of the traditional literature course (Hopkins, 1984) because it was “...killing the Irish language in post-primary schools” (Ó Dubhthaigh 1978:28). The solution to the problem, according to some commentators, at that time, was to remove the “burden of literature” that was on the curriculum due to it being excessive and get rid of the emphasis on the written word to adhere mainly to the spoken language (Cronin 2019:12).

In the eighties, when the Irish-language syllabi were renewed under the banner of the communicative approach theory, the amount of literature texts that students had to explore at both junior and senior cycle was cut, and it was decided that they would have a choice between a fully elective course and a designated literature course. That arrangement was reached so that the course would be both relevant and enjoyable for students. However, there is some evidence that students feel there’s a difference between their own lives as young people and the type of life that is revealed in Irish-language literature and they have a negative image of it as a result (Ní Dhonnabháin 2014:171-172). Although it seemed recently that junior cycle students were happy with the range of literature texts available, they nevertheless complained and were displeased with the amount of literary texts that had to be covered (Mac Gearailt and Ó Duibhir 2023:33-44). Arising from the feedback of the Early enactment review of Junior Cycle Irish T1 and T2, (Mac Gearailt and Ó Duibhir, 20232), amendments were made to the following:

- the minimum amount of literary texts that students explore over the three years of the Junior Cycle for T1 and T2 as well as the genres to be investigated
- the list of recommended literary texts for the first year T1 and T2 and prescribed lists of literary texts for the second and third years T1 and T2.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment commissioned Sealbhú¹, of Dublin City University, to undertake a follow-up review and study that will gather more detailed feedback on schools' experiences of working with the T1 and T2 specifications. The research will focus on a cohort of students who started the Junior Cycle in September 2023. This longitudinal research will last three years.

The State Examination Commission's report² on Junior Cycle Irish (2023) said and recommended, regarding the teaching of literature:

"It is essential to use literature as a source and tool for teaching and learning as well as enriching and expanding vocabulary. As stated in the specification, 'it is recommended to integrate the development of language and literature skills in the classroom to support the students' language development'. It is through this approach that candidates will develop the capacity to demonstrate all language skills when responding to literature" (State Examinations Commission, 2023).

With this background in mind, it is timely to explore and discuss here the role and function of Irish-language literature in curriculum specifications for Irish at post-primary.

3. What is a literary text?

There are many understandings of what a "text" is. In recent years, the traditional understanding or concept of a text that has always been a work in print, sharing the status and authoritative voice of the canon, has been greatly enhanced. Today however, unlike years ago, it is not at all unusual to hear "new" voices in a text on a literary syllabus, other than only the voices of men and white people (Mowitt, 2002). The concept now seems to involve multiple voices or plurality. It is therefore interesting to briefly review the evolution that has occurred over the centuries of our understanding of what a literary text is.

It is certain that humans have always wanted to leave some trace of themselves in the world, by creating a creative self-expression that would last forever. It was originally a visual trace in the earliest depictions of prehistoric cave paintings. Before writing was developed as a system of symbols, (pictographs or alphabets), there was oral literature. But gradually, and over the centuries, texts were associated with the written word rather than the visual or the oral literature. It was only in the drama genre that the visual and verbal aspects were preserved, which were transformed in cinematography in the twentieth century.

Nowadays, on web pages, writing is linked to sounds, pictures and video clips. In addition to that, in recent years, the graphic novel is being given attention as another medium that connects the visual and the written word. Therefore, contemporary literature is now a field that is more open to other media such as the stage, art, film, music and the internet.

¹ <https://www.dcu.ie/sealbhu>

² [IR-AR-58504032.pdf \(examinations.ie\)](#)

4. The canon

In literature, a canon is a collection of works considered representative of a period or genre. It is "good literature" which has the authorities' (critics and academics) seal of approval and is widely accepted as a yardstick for any literary work put on an educational curriculum. For centuries, it represented work written primarily by men that was not representative of the cultures or subcultures of the world as a whole. Over time, there has been a significant change in the type and quality of the works that are considered to be the canon and now, genres are accepted in the canon from authors and artists with a variety of backgrounds and cultures.

Curriculum designers and teachers rely on the canon to explore literature with students to give them a taste of different works and genres. Therefore, it is vital that the canon includes works that are representative of contemporary society and cultures (including subcultures). Questions about what works are worth studying are likely to continue as cultural norms and customs change.

5. Why literature in the first place?

The benefit of exploring a literary text in the Irish-language class is precisely stated in the Junior Cycle specifications:

"A literary text is one which demonstrates the state or circumstances of an individual: a story which derives from emotions, life experience, memories, and the predicament of the human condition... Creative works; films, short stories, songs, plays, poems, novels and more relate to the heart and mind, to emotions and imagination" (Department of Education, Irish Junior Cycle Specification (T1 and T2).

It is clear from this definition of a literary text that literature is closely related to human circumstances, and due to this, it has an educational function. It is also clear that literature is part of the daily entertainment (Council of Europe, 2020:51;206) and of the artistic escape that people are familiar with and is popular in the contemporary world.

There is a large difference between a text containing descriptive prose or an expository text³ (which students experience in the form of reading comprehension pieces) and a creative text:

Expository text	Creative text
Instrumental	Aesthetic
Facts	Imagination
Logical	Intuitive
Impersonal/Objective	Personal/Subjective
Thoughtful disposition	Emotional disposition
Appeals primarily to the intellect	Appeals primarily to the senses/emotions
Adheres to conventions	Often circumvents conventions

An expository text emphasises objective facts, whereas a creative text, in contrast, is aesthetically stimulating and involves an imaginative depiction of emotions, events, characters and life experiences. It is an intuitive personal activity. Unlike the creative text that may circumvent

³ An expository text is a text that is written or put together to explain or give information or to describe something, e.g. a passage or a reading comprehension piece.

literary conventions, the expository text is presented according to definite literary conventions. The creative text can be read on different levels as it can have multiple interpretations.

6. The educational functions of literature

6.1 Language and literacy

The literary text is a source of good language. It must be remembered that literature is composed for the language community itself in the first place, rather than for the learner, and it is an example of authentic content that involves a wide range of language registers and styles, which helps learners as they develop and enrichment their language aptitudes.

Literacy is recognised as an integral part of the knowledge, skills and values that the curriculum imparts to the student (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022:26). There are many types of literacy when it comes to engaging with a literary text. For example, the exploration of literature is an important part of cultural literacy. Cultural literacy is a person's capacity to understand all the subtle nuances related to living in a particular society. It consists of understanding the language, methods, and ideas specific to the behaviour and communication of that society. It applies significantly to all cultures, including the culture of the Irish language (both the contemporary and historical culture).

The exploration of literature also relates to the development of emotional literacy. Emotional literacy means a person's capacity to recognise, validate and express emotions as a personal response to a text, as well as to recognise the emotions of others.

It could also be media literacy. Media literacy refers to a person's ability to understand the messages being conveyed on the television, on the radio, in video games, movies, news programmes, social media, and more. Digital literacy is an integral part of media literacy, which is particularly emphasised in Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood (Government of Ireland, 2024) as set out in the strategy to empower schools to take advantage of the opportunities of digital transformation and to build digital competence among both teachers and learners.⁴

The concept of literacy has changed a lot in recent years and now, multimodal literacy includes a mix of different texts, including audio texts, music, images and videos on a range of technologies, including software platforms. Today's youth are active media users and they have an intuitive understanding of both multimodal literacy and modern technology. The research suggests, however, that they are not always sophisticated users and that they need 'guidance' when engaging in multimodal literacy (Martin, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to "extend and refine students' ability to use digital technology, communication tools, and the internet creatively, critically and safely, in support of their development, learning and capacity to participate effectively in social and community life"⁵ (Digital Media Literacy: Junior Cycle Short Course).

⁴ The appendix in this discussion paper looks at how to embed digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment.

⁵ <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/71b6b946-971b-4003-8bfa-028932cc4daa/ncca-jc-short-course-dml.pdf>

This must be taken into account when exploring literary texts in class. Evidence shows that students stop sampling literature if teachers use a traditional paper-based approach and if the emphasis is placed on rote learning (Flanagan and Hall, 2017). Therefore, although it is accepted that literacy is an evolutionary concept, it is extremely important to take the new literacies into account when exploring literature in the Irish-language class. There are important possibilities here to make students aware of the different genres and to teach the difference, for example, between a poem and a song and a novel, a short story and a play.

6.2 A “different” view of the world

Literature connects the experiences of students with the many experiences of life. They can identify with different themes as they are revealed in literary texts, such as love, heroism, family matters and disappointment, for example. Sometimes, other themes and perspectives are discussed that are outside the students' range of experience in general, e.g., kidnapping, loneliness, human suffering, nostalgia and war. Teachers have the opportunity to organise different interactions in class so that students have the opportunity to express opinions and life experiences in relation to the themes of these literary texts. It is not necessary to adhere to only discussion for this, role-playing, plays, games and creative writing could be used, even composing theme songs or making short films on the mobile phone, and internet clips as well.

6.3 Community and Gaeltacht voices

"The truths of our ancestors and the truths and reality of contemporary life are in Irish-language literature" (Ó Laoire 2004:147). The voice of the community has always been heard in Irish-language literature. Gaeltacht literature, for example, is a very important part of the Irish-language literary corpus, which connects us to the unbroken linguistic heritage; and which reflects the spirituality and values of the historical and contemporary community. It is a precious source of language and customs. Through the medium of literature, the experiences, astuteness, desire and labours of the community known as wisdom are delivered. In the absence of that, as Ó Doibhlin (1973) reminded us, language is only a insipid system of symbols.

Therefore, it is important that today's students are exposed to the truths of our ancestors in the literature of heroism, in the oral tradition, in lore, for example, in addition to the richness of the language of contemporary literature so that they have an understanding of cultural heritage. This is also true, of course, in the case of the literature composed by authors, poets and film directors who lived and live in the world of Irish language outside of the Gaeltacht which mirrors a life between two cultures and the historical and contemporary poetry of language.

6.4 Personal growth and emotional development

Literature is an important resource for emotional development. Literary texts create opportunities for students to identify with characters and the emotions they are expressing. This supports students to learn about the nature of humanity, about human values and about their own lives. This is very much in line with the emphasis on well-being in contemporary education, which is included, for example, in key competencies and skills from primary school to the end of post-primary school (NCCA, 2023).

Literature provides an insight, not only into the literary work itself, but also into how the world around us works. By exploring any literary text, students have the opportunity to insert themselves into the lives of others, which contributes to personal and emotional development and which gives them an understanding of the complexity of human relationships. This results in giving them a certain emotional, aesthetic and intuitive satisfaction. This is a significant advantage for promoting human well-being. This is equivalent to education for survival (Lazar 1993:19). Students can enjoy reading works of literature, identifying with characters or themes in poetry and prose, regardless of whether they are within or outside their own range of experiences. Rosenblatt (1995: 175) argues: "The power of literature to offer entertainment and recreation", therefore, students can immerse themselves in another world as if they were listening to their favorite music lyrics on a vinyl record or watching an internet video or a TikTok clip. Poetry and creative prose relate to the heart, mind, emotions and imagination and they bring enjoyment, benefit and freedom. Therefore, it is important that poetry, prose and film are presented and explored in a way that evoke interest and stimulates the students' imagination.

When the student reads a poem, or creative prose (novel, short story, play, novella) or when the student watches a film, two minds and two experiences come together, the mind and experience of the poet/author/director and the mind and experience of the student. The work of literary arts affects the person who reads it and it moves them or not, depending on the reaction or counter-reaction to the text. If it is an artistic text, it often evokes emotions or excites the imagination or stimulates reflection. Let us recall the words of Ó Doibhlin (1973:21) here:

"Because a work of literature is a halfway house where two personalities meet, the writer and the reader, and where they form a relationship and fellowship with each other. The writer has left their own shadow in the poem, the play, the novel and that shadow waits patiently in print and in the book like the genie in Aladdin's magic lamp waiting for the reader to come, to be released and that they may accomplish their feat. This shadow depends on us, readers: we must lend ourselves to it both body and mind, both feeling and imagination"

6.5 Literary criticism skills

The exploration of literature fosters opportunities for communication, interaction and dialogue that awaken the learner's imagination and support the development of communication, critical and creative skills. Writing is most associated with literature, but speaking is the most natural in the context of human experience; if a book is read, a film is watched or a song is heard, for example, it is likely to be talked about first. Therefore, it is recommended to always explore the spoken word and not just keep to reading and writing while handling a literary text during the Irish-language class.

Students are given the opportunity to develop critical skills. As they connect the experiences of authors, poets and film directors with their own life experiences, they engage with the language of the text or the cinematography of the film and reflect on how words, images, similes, metaphors, symbols, the imaginative transformation, etc., are chosen. Words are the raw material of literary texts and images are the raw material of filmmaking. These words and images (the cinematography) are able to evoke a living feeling in the mind and heart. The literary text is the use and creative expression of the words and images. By focusing critically on literary texts, students develop their analytical, interpretation and comparative skills and so on and, accordingly,

they have the opportunity to significantly improve their speaking (talking about the work) and writing skills. They get to know character traits and themes and learn to talk and write about how they are presented in the text and express opinions about them.

7. Teaching literary texts

7.1 Literary texts and language learning

According to Collie and Slater (1990, 145) one of the main reasons teachers use literary texts in the classroom is to enrich students' language. Students use literary texts, not only for interpretation and information, but they are also a very effective method or way to learn a language. Literature provides an ideal model and exemplar of language for those who hear and read it. It must be remembered again that literature is not composed for the learner in the first place but for the natural user of language, be that a native speaker or a new-speaker. By using literary texts, students learn new words, syntax, native expressions and discourse functions and they develop their writing and speaking skills as a result. The goal is for students to purposely imitate the richness of language in the literary texts and that it will benefit their own personal vocabulary.

Moreover, literature plays an important role in the formation of reading skills and habits. Therefore, students have the opportunity to sample and understand the grammar, structure, scope and syntax of the language in context. On top of all that, the literary text contains the exemplification and rhythm of the language which could give students an understanding of the nature and essence of the language. Speaking skills are encouraged if students are keen to provide an oral response to the text in addition to developing reflective skills and promoting creativity. Therefore, the development, enrichment and perpetuation of language must always be maintained by integrating the texts with the lesson or the language unit. Therefore, it isn't advisable to separate and explore literary texts independently of the teaching and learning of the language itself.

7.2 Challenges

Sometimes it is felt that the quality or level of language of the literary text is beyond the range of abilities of some students and they struggle to derive meaning from the text itself as a result. They may have difficulties when it comes to reading or decoding the text itself, or, they may not have acquired enough language to tackle it. Students have so many difficulties with the language type and register in the texts themselves that they do not enjoy them as they should. The difficulties get on top of them and they stop trying to overcome them. If students do not have this capacity, they surrender to a dull, boring, word for word translation. Summaries are given and they are learned off by heart along with notes as ammunition for the examination questions and they stop engaging with literary texts as a result.

In this case and as part of best practice for dealing with students of all ability levels, it is recommended that the following two practices are always avoided:

1. Translate a text word for word
2. Give summaries and notes for rote learning

The most important thing is to provide every opportunity for students to make their own of the human experience that is revealed or even hidden in the literary text and to express that by speaking, writing or through digital literacy. To that end, the following is recommended:

- Teach reading strategies to students in advance
- Teach strategies for overcoming difficulties in reading a text
- Use dictionaries and electronic dictionaries to find the meaning of words.
- Break up the text into short, more readable passages
- Use a digital version of the text and make digital notes of the difficulties – underline words, make notes, show an explanation of a word to pre-empt the difficulties.
- Peer reading during pair work or group work with other students of the same ability to support each other and peer reading with a student/students who have good skills and beneficial experience.
- Write summaries and notes of their own, as small as they are from the beginning and add to them gradually and as self-confidence and courage are built upon.

Duff and Maley (2007) raise a wide range of questions in this regard regarding the selection of texts. These are some of the questions:

1. Is the material interesting for the learners? Are they able to identify with the content, with the characters etc. in it?
 2. Is the literary style understandable? – the texts must be suitable for the students' level of understanding and ability.
 3. Regarding text length, it may be easier to use shorter texts within the available class time.
- In the appendix of this discussion paper, further recommendations are made regarding the exploration of literary texts while always integrating them of course with the lesson or the target language unit.

7.3 Two approaches

Essentially, there are two recognised approaches to teaching, learning and testing literary texts in the language class:

1. Transmission approach
2. Sociocultural approach

7.3.1: Transmission approach

This is the traditional approach and the one used most often in language classes. The image that immediately emerges here is that students are sitting in straight rows with the teacher in front of them (Beach et al 2021: 5) reading the text and questioning them about it. It is the teacher who directs everything and delivers all the information about the text, the themes, the characters, the literary cues, etc. This approach recalls Beach et al of Freire's (1973) banking model of education: (2021:6) "You then give students tests to determine if they can replicate what you taught them". The emphasis here is on "covering" the text from beginning to end. The coverage of the text is more important than the students' personal response or interpretation of the text, or the exploratory journey through the text itself. Students play a passive role in this process, taking in information rather than creating an active response. Schowalter (2002:13) has commented on the challenge of the approach as follows:

“...obsession with coverage and content is one of the main barriers to good teaching...instead of aiming for comprehensive coverage, we have to think about what students need to read in order to establish a basis for further learning.”

The texts and notes about them are of particular importance, as is covering all aspects related to them in a comprehensive manner. This doesn't equate to claiming that students are involved in this learning process or even that they are determined to find information about the texts. Beach et al (2021:6) describe the challenge of inactivity among students if this delivery approach is kept: “All of this positions students to assume relatively passive dependent roles in the literature classroom. While you as a teacher certainly play a central role in scaffolding and modelling ways of interpreting literature, students need to be actively engaged in practicing responding to literature with peers and they will not have that opportunity if they are passively watching the teacher perform.”

In order to guide students to pursue knowledge independently of the teacher regarding the exploration of a literary text, a socio-cultural approach is recommended.

7.3.2: Sociocultural approach

According to socio-cultural theories that have come to the fore in the education domain in recent years, learning is located within social experiences and contexts. This is to say that learning occurs when students are functioning as members of a community or group. These are human social practices through which we get to know ourselves and through which we acquire knowledge and life experience. Therefore, students could discover this knowledge and self-identity while responding to a literary text while participating in social activities such as peer work, group work, pair work, while always being part of a crowd of their peers. This approach is often called New Literary Studies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). In this approach, the student or learner is a member of the community of practice for action learning. Beach et al (2021:7) again explains what is involved:

“Many secondary school students are not familiar with what it means to participate in a literary community of practice.⁶ They have grown accustomed to teacher-centered approaches to literature. As a teacher your job is to invite them into this community and to demonstrate for them the kinds of dialogue, inquiry and interpretative engagement that participating in a literary community of practice entails”.

What does this approach really mean? The hallmarks of this approach are as follows:

- Students are free to choose their own texts according to their range of interests and abilities;
- They have a choice in communicating interactions that reflect their response to the text;
- Students plan and design these interactions beforehand in collaboration with the teacher;
- Not all students in the class are engaging with the same literary text at the same time all the time. Students could be engaging with different texts in groups or individually;

⁶ Students who partake in joint learning about literature of their own accord independent of teachers.

- They express opinions and feelings and share their insights on how they can or can't identify with the literary texts by implementing different activities, for example: individual and group presentations, making video clips, plays and role-plays, different readings of characters and themes, creating song lyrics based on themes and characters, composing different endings, creating visual texts or graphics, writing and sharing blogs, comparing themes with contemporary social and political issues, creating retellings, making comparisons with other works of literature/art, solving problems (Freire 1973);
- When engaging with a literary text, they reflectively communicate their difficulties and challenges (e.g. new vocabulary, variants and speech cues) to the teacher/group/class);
- In an examination or test of understanding and response to the literary text, emphasis is placed on speaking in particular and on oral presentations together with blogs and personal notes, rather than only using written responses.

8. Assessment

It is recommended that the assessment of literary texts is integrated with the assessment of language skills. The assessment depends primarily on the objective of studying literary texts in the first place. A question could be raised as to what is involved in that objective. Knowledge of the texts alone could be the main objective, but the students' experience and response to the text could also be at the forefront of the same objective.

If knowledge of the text is the only objective, the assessment would only seek that same knowledge. Because a socio-cultural approach is recommended and that the text be integrated with the language, it is recommended to place the emphasis in the continuous formative assessment and in the summative assessment on revealing opinions about the literary text while taking into account the connection with the student's life experience and experiences. Therefore, it is important that the assessment would be based on activities that are in line with the classroom activities. In this way, it is ensured that the teaching and the assessment are suited to each other.

Assessment, especially the final examination, has an undeniable impact on the type of approach and practice that emerges in the classroom. Therefore, if the assessment tasks, including the final examination, are based closely on the types of tasks and activities practiced in the classroom, this will help to deepen and develop students' speaking and writing skills. In addition to that, self-assessment plays a role especially in the formative assessment (an e-portfolio would be both useful and beneficial for that) and the multiple talents of the students must always be taken into account in the same formative assessment.

9. Conclusion

In this discussion paper, a definition of a literary text was provided and there was a discussion on the many educational reasons related to exploring a literary text in a post-primary Irish-language class. There was a particular emphasis placed on the close connection that the exploration of literature has with the culture of the Irish language, with personal and emotional growth and with the development of students' well-being. The literary text is a repository of good language. The possibilities relating to the exploration of literature and the development of literacy, including digital and multimodal literacy, were discussed. The importance of the Irish-language teacher's approach and actions to always integrate the literary text with the development of language skills,

especially speaking Irish to support the development of the students' language aptitudes, was specified. It is clear, therefore, that literature plays a specific and important role in Irish-language specifications at post-primary level at the moment, and will always do so.

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11. Appendix

Ideas and strategies for integrating literary texts into the lesson or the target Irish-language unit

Literary texts can be integrated into the lesson or language unit without too much effort. Teaching literature had its own approach over the years. It was as if there was a complete divide between the teaching of the language and the teaching of literature.

Communication is central to the Irish-language specifications in both the junior and senior cycles. It must be remembered, therefore, that the literary text itself is a natural text of communication. There is a message and the knowledge gap that is fundamental to the communicative approach is to be filled. Students come across the communication message, they engage imaginatively and emotionally with that basic message, and express opinions and a response about it and they convey enjoyment or otherwise. Therefore, literature should be taught within the communicative approach.

There are a number of language, cognitive and metacognitive skills that students may acquire when they are in the process of exploring a literary text as the Council of Europe explains to us (2020:93-107), skills such as:

- Relaying information
- Explaining data
- Processing text
- Translating a text
- Note-taking
- Expressing a personal response to texts
- Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature)
- Composing creative texts.

In order to foster these skills, it is recommended to use, as far as possible, a socio-cultural approach and to give students as much freedom as possible in choosing texts, planning and carrying out tasks and interactions in collaboration with the teacher.

In order to develop students' multimodal literacy, it is recommended to embed, as much as possible, digital technologies into teaching and learning as suggested in the new literacy strategy referred to above (Government of Ireland, 2023). To this end, it is recommended to use films, art, pop songs, music, plays, the media and clips that students would appreciate and be familiar with because an approach like this could attract students towards understanding the main message of the literature work in terms of their own lived experiences.

The following is a list of tasks, strategies or activities that could be planned and implemented while integrating the literary work with the language unit in the Irish-language class at both junior and senior cycle levels. There is no particular order to these tasks and these are just random examples that will prompt teachers to think about and devise their own strategies and tasks to suit their classroom contexts and their own students.

Tascanna, straitéisí agus gníomhaíochtaí féideartha

- ☐ Give the title of the work (poem, play, short film, short story) to the class. When students read the title of the work, they make guesses in groups of three or four about the content and theme of the work and they present their opinions orally.
-

- ☐ After students have read part of the text, or explored/sampled the text as a whole, they share ideas together in small groups about:
 - What is being said in this text?
 - What are the thoughts that occur to us about it?
 - Why are we exploring a text like this in the first place?
 - What can we learn from it?
 - What is our emotional reaction or counter-reaction to it?
 - Are there other works that contain the same theme that we have experienced, e.g. music lyrics, TikTok clips, films, poems in other language(s), etc.?

A “think aloud” protocol (TAP) can be used for this in the case of the individual student.

- ☐ They express the opinions of the group orally to the class as a whole or a specific site or app can be used to express the preliminary opinions first and then record an oral presentation and share it with the class. They compare the different views.
-

- ☐ Students come up with their own questions and their own oral presentations on the literary work which has been explored:
 - What do you notice about character X or theme X or the plot?
 - Does it remind you of anything that happened to you/ someone else/ a story you read/ a film you saw?
-

- ☐ They take on different roles and create a short play (three minutes) in the form of a clip on the work. They record the play and add a musical soundtrack and use pictures and graphics to this end. This could be a week's work and not everyone in the class has to explore the same work. They share the clip online. They could use a particular site or app for this.
-

- ☐ Student X records (podcast) student Y talking about a poem/short film using a particular site or app for this.
-

- ☐ They write an imaginary conversation between student X and a character in the short story/ the poet of the poem/ a character in the short film and record it as a podcast and share it on a particular site or app.
-

- ☐ They write a letter to the poet or author expressing their opinions about the work and/or asking him/her questions about it.
-

- ☐ They rewrite or compose other endings in the case of a short story, novel, folk tale or short film.
-

- ☐ They retell the theme of the work using one or more media: diary entry, pictures, graphics, rap songs, clips, etc.
-

- ☐ They retell or rewrite the short story/novel/play/short film from the perspectives of another character/other characters.
-

- ☐ The student writes an imaginary interview between her/him and a character in a short story/short film/novel.
-

- ☐ They make a clip to convey the theme of a poem – they add soundtracks and graphics and share it online, or they give an oral presentation based on it.
-

- ☐ They write a monologue and present it in the form of a podcast to explain the position of a main character or characters in a short story / short film or novel.
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- ☐ They give a reinterpretation of a poem in their own words in prose.
-

- ☐ They write their own summaries of the literary work. Summaries are quite suitable for short stories, short films and reality dramas, where they contain concrete elements such as a plot, setting and characters that help guide the students' writing.
-

- ☐ Students take on the role of a character in the short story/novel/drama and reflect on the character in the form of a journal entry or use other media, a letter, rap lyrics, a PowerPoint presentation, a magazine report, a blog/part of a graphic novel (if students have that capacity) etc. to express the retort.

-
- ☐ Reading together. Two people are asked to read different pieces of prose or lines/verses of a poem together. Different pieces/excerpts of the short story/novel excerpt/piece of folklore are shared for each pair/group. They use a dictionary for words they don't understand. They express information/opinions about what they have read on posters/PowerPoint and, in this way, the reading of the short story/novel excerpt is included as a whole.
-

- ☐ It is recommended that the reading together happens in small groups or in pairs:
Know the following sentences:
- Ní thuigim cad is brí le... (I don't understand what...means.)
 - Cad a chiallaíonn... Níl a fhios agam cad a chiallaíonn... (What does... mean / I don't know what... means.)
 - Féachaimis ar an ngluais/ bhfoclóir... (Let's look at the glossary/ dictionary...)
-



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