



# Understanding Irish Spelling

*A Handbook for Teachers and Learners*



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An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta



**Nancy Stenson and Tina Hickey**

# **Understanding Irish Spelling A Handbook for Teachers and Learners**

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**Nancy Stenson and Tina Hickey**

Dedicated to Caitríona Olson and to Caitríona Callan

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# Chapter 1 Introduction: Why Teach Irish Reading?

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*Q: What would you most like help with in teaching Irish reading?*

*A: You mean the most help for teachers? I think, maybe to be taught how to teach [Irish] reading, rather than making it up yourself!*

The quotation above was one of several responses received from teachers in a series of interviews that sought their perceptions of how Irish reading is taught and of the particular challenges they face in helping school children develop literacy skills in their second language. Although less specific than some responses, this one captures vividly the sense of frustration on the part of teachers who feel unprepared for the task of building Irish literacy, and are uncertain of how to proceed. Although phonics instruction is now routine in teaching English reading, teachers report feeling that the preparation they receive for that task does not transfer to the teaching of Irish reading. We agree, and that is the primary reason for developing this handbook. Irish reading is currently neglected in schools on many levels, starting with the lack of preparation to teach Irish reading as a subject distinct from English reading. In the early years of primary schooling it is understandable when dealing with second-language learners that the emphasis is on oral language. But when written Irish is introduced, teachers struggle to support pupils in this task and often feel unsupported in their work. Mainstream (English-medium) schools often lack Irish reading materials. Teachers, who themselves never learned how the Irish spelling system works, report uncertainty about how to help their pupils understand it. Furthermore, curricular constraints make it difficult to provide dedicated time for Irish reading on a regular basis in many classes when priority must be given to developing oral skills in the language. In this handbook we aim to address the gap in preparation and support that is reported by both teachers and teacher educators, and that is reflected in the quotation above.

Further exploration of data on Irish reading indicated that the teachers we talked with are not alone in feeling that something is missing with regard to teaching Irish. Inspectorate reports and other studies from the Department of Education and Skills indicated that weaknesses were noted in Irish reading instruction, and commented on a lack of teacher preparation and heavy reliance on Irish textbooks at the expense of more rewarding reading materials. Limited Irish reading materials are not the only problem: international research indicates that language awareness on the part of teachers is essential for development of pupils' literacy. Moats (1994) found serious weaknesses in language awareness among reading and language arts' teachers in the United States, and in 2009 she published a follow-up article arguing for the importance of developing such language awareness in pre-service teachers, and detailing the foundational knowledge necessary for effective reading instruction. Moats's analysis related to educational settings where teachers are supporting literacy in children's mother tongue. Clearly, the need for support is even greater for those teaching literacy in a second language to children who have limited proficiency in that language, or even to first language speakers of a threatened minority language such as Irish.

The focus of this handbook is to describe systematic patterns of spelling in Irish that can be explicitly taught to help pupils relate written Irish words to what they already know of

spoken Irish. However, our ultimate goal is to facilitate and encourage Irish reading as a supplement to the classroom experience of spoken Irish, to increase exposure to the language and to build vocabulary and grammar knowledge. This handbook is not a comprehensive course on reading pedagogy, but we hope that it will help to provide teachers with some ideas for approaching the teaching of the relationship between Irish spelling and pronunciation, and perhaps help to enhance their confidence in their own understanding of the orthographic system of Irish. If any readers are dubious about the value of such instruction, we discuss that too, in the next chapters.

We are very aware that it is not only school children who find Irish spelling challenging. Adult learners of Irish likewise report frustration in getting to grips with Irish spelling. To our knowledge, there are no materials for adult learners that address, except in the most cursory way, the issue of Irish sound-spelling correspondences and of how they differ from those of English. Experience with teaching adults has led one of us to develop some systematic exercises for learners, which many students reported finding helpful. These were the inspiration for some of the material in this book. Although they have been considerably expanded and adapted here for use with a broader (and younger) audience, we hope that they will prove useful as well to adults studying Irish, especially those working independently without access to a fluent teacher to assist them. We believe that the book will also be a useful resource for student teachers and in-service teachers who wish to improve their own understanding of how Irish spelling works, in order to help them in teaching primary school pupils.

The literature on bilingual literacy has provided little discussion of the unique Irish sociolinguistic situation in which native speakers of a majority language all study an endangered minority language in a variety of school settings. Most discussions of bilingual literacy acquisition are embedded in contexts where minority language speakers are learning the majority language of a society (immigration settings) or where majority language speakers study a minority language in immersion contexts, such as the study of French in Canada, Spanish (among others) in the US, or Irish in Gaelscoileanna in Ireland. But the situation of Irish learners in English medium schools in Ireland cannot easily be compared with these settings. Among the differences that characterise this Irish context are

- the limited access to Irish that most learners encounter inside and outside their classrooms,
- greater limitations on the availability of resources for teaching and learning compared with more commonly taught languages like English, French and Spanish, and
- the fact that most teachers of Irish are themselves speakers of Irish as a second language (L2).

As a result, expectations for second language acquisition (SLA) that arise from research in international settings may seem somewhat unrealistic in the Irish context. Nevertheless, research findings regarding SLA and their pedagogical implications can inform teaching practices, if used and adapted thoughtfully to the context in which Irish is taught. This handbook offers an approach to one aspect of Irish language instruction: the teaching and learning of reading and spelling.

In Irish primary schools, all teachers teach Irish as part of the regular curriculum. In over 90% of schools, it is a single subject among twelve in the curriculum, and the issue of curricular overcrowding is a cause for considerable concern among teachers and education officials (Council of Europe, 2007). Decreases in time devoted to the teaching of Irish mean

that the time still available must be used as efficiently as possible, and we will argue below that improved attention to reading instruction provides one way to increase learning efficiency for Irish.

Another concern discussed by the Council of Europe (2007) Profile for Ireland and by Stenson and Hickey (2014) is the lack of time given in teacher education programmes to the specific needs of teaching Irish and to building teachers' language competence and confidence in their own Irish skills. The Council of Europe's (2007) profile indicates, for example, that over 20% of Irish primary teachers believe that they have insufficient Irish to teach it well. It is hoped that the exercises at the end of this volume can contribute toward improving understanding in the domain of Irish spelling and orthography, which, as we will argue, can help improve oral skills as well as building literacy.

## Who Reads Irish?

Most children in the Republic of Ireland are native English speakers who begin to learn Irish as a second language (L2) at school entry. In English-medium schools where Irish is taught as a single subject, initial literacy is introduced in English, and Irish lessons focus on oral skills until Second Class, when children are usually introduced to reading in Irish as L2. Conversely, in *Gaeltacht* schools, Irish is the first language (L1) for some (but not all) pupils, as it is also for a smaller proportion of children in *Gaelscoileanna*. Irish is the medium of instruction for *Gaelscoileanna* and for most *Gaeltacht* schools, but it is the L2 for many of the children attending. In *Gaelscoileanna*, children generally learn their initial literacy in Irish and begin English reading later (schools vary regarding when). Another group of Irish learners among children attending school in Ireland are those who come from other language backgrounds and learn Irish as their third (or fourth, etc.) language. Finally, outside Ireland, some children of the Irish diaspora also attend community language classes, particularly in the UK, and to a lesser extent in the US and Australia.

A growing number of adults also learn Irish, both in Ireland and internationally. Many courses are offered within Ireland to adult learners wishing to improve their school Irish as well as to visitors from abroad. Recent decades have also seen a worldwide flourishing of Irish courses for adults, both credit-bearing university-level courses and informal study-groups. Although Irish is mostly studied in Anglophone countries, Irish language learners are also found in Germany, Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, Israel and Japan, among others. Although they tend to have high levels of L1 reading fluency and many have good knowledge of other languages as well, these learners bring different levels of proficiency in Irish and in language learning to the task of Irish reading.

All these groups are likely to encounter similar challenges in their Irish reading efforts, especially those who have already learned or are learning to read in English. Their understanding of how print works, the general awareness of reading left to right, letter names, and the fact that letters or letter sequences stand for sounds of the spoken language will transfer to the reading of Irish, but their understanding of precisely how letters are related to the sounds of English will not help them in reading Irish, and may even cause difficulty, because the ways in which letters represent sounds of Irish are quite different, as are the sounds themselves

## Neglect of Irish reading

A series of interviews with primary teachers and other language professionals on the teaching of Irish (Hickey and Stenson, 2016, discussed in more detail in the next chapter) reveals a strong view that the emphasis on communication in the Irish curriculum up to recent changes resulted in a focus on spoken Irish over other modalities, and indicated that little attention has been given in many mainstream primary classrooms to formal reading instruction. It should be noted that, although the 1999 Curriculum for Primary Schools (NCCA 1999) does emphasise the primacy of oral language, it was quite explicit in advocating a four-skills approach that accorded high importance to literacy, within the framework of a communicative curriculum. While the increased attention in Irish schools to oral language is a positive improvement on the approach in earlier generations of Irish language education, we take issue with the notion that reading and writing are not also both essential and communicative uses of language. We find that the rather incidental approach to reading reported in many classrooms has not served learners particularly well, a viewpoint that later chapters will show to be shared by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Inspectorate, and other researchers in second language acquisition. We see reading as an essential component of language development and in this section we argue for increased attention to reading as part of the second language curriculum.

## Why teach reading in Irish?

Reading instruction is an important component of a second language programme for a number of reasons, which include both developmental and practical considerations. Some of these are discussed in this section.

**Oral language development:** There is some evidence of a direct connection between literacy and oral language development. A study by Tarone, Bigelow and Hansen (2007), for example, found that the oral skills of English learners corresponded to their levels of literacy in their first *and* second languages. Explicit focus on spelling/sound correspondences can also draw learners' attention to aspects of Irish pronunciation that can initially be difficult to distinguish. Practice with minimal pairs, such as *bád/báid* or *bó/beo*, teaches both spelling differences and the pronunciations associated with them. See Chapter 4 for further discussion and Chapter 10 for examples of exercises.

Oral and written language can also reinforce each other if good models of reading materials are available for children to hear as they read. In a study examining the effects of providing recordings to accompany Irish books assigned for reading at home, Hickey (1991) found improvement in the pleasure young readers took from their reading experience when they were able to listen to recorded versions while they read. After participating in the programme and being persuaded of the value of reading and listening as mutual support, a teacher observed:

*I think it's really important, again like, the way you learn language is listening to it, but you don't get very many opportunities to listen to it, so at least if you're reading and listening to it, someone who's reading with you, and you've got more opportunity to do that, so the reading kind of puts a structure, and adds kind of a structured listening element.*

**Family involvement:** In addition, while many English-speaking parents would not consider themselves able to speak Irish with their children, reading is an activity they might be more comfortable with. As another teacher put it:

*Absolutely, yes [reading is an essential element of language learning]. Definitely, because it adds to their enjoyment of the language and you know it's something they take home to parents who don't have the language and they can share it with them and the child becomes the teacher and, you know, the parent becomes more interested in their child's education. So it is an essential part.*

**Policy:** Recent policy developments also give reason for increased attention to how literacy skills are taught in both English and Irish. The multilingual composition of many classrooms, and the need to streamline what is perceived as a crowded curriculum has led to the development and phasing in of a new Primary Language Curriculum based on an integrated approach to language teaching (see Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). The new curricula developed (NCCA, 2015) for English-medium and Irish-medium schools reconfigure the teaching of English and Irish, with the specification of learning outcomes and progression continua for the integrated teaching of English and Irish, and aim to “support teachers to help children to develop positive dispositions towards language and literacy” (NCCA, 2017: 1). In parallel with curriculum changes, the State has formally adopted a ‘20 year Strategy for the Irish language 2010-30’, including a commitment to explicitly foster “both oral and written competence in Irish among students” (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.4). If these objectives are to be achieved, the value of solid foundational literacy skills will be essential, and our goal here is to open dialogue on ways to help to support teachers in how they approach the task.

**Later educational needs:** The primary focus may indeed be on oral language in primary school and rightly so, but there is no question that literacy is essential at the post-primary level of education. The Leaving Certificate, despite recent changes, still has a significant written component, and the curriculum continues to include literature and writing throughout post-primary schooling. Pupils will not be able for this if they have not already developed Irish reading skills, and it would also be helpful if they have some experience of reading for pleasure in Irish, which is unlikely to happen if they do not have those skills. The Council of Europe's language profile for Ireland noted the problem of tenuous links between the primary and post-primary curricula, and post-primary teachers we have interviewed report that pupils entering their classes are far weaker in Irish literacy skills than they should be after 8 years of primary schooling. This suggests a need for greater attention to reading before the children enter post-primary education. Focusing on reading as a communicative activity—another way of acquiring information—can help prepare pupils for the print-based component of their post-primary education, but it may also have beneficial effects on their overall language acquisition.

**Access to the language:** A basic principle of learning theory is the time-on-task principle, popularised in Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule (*Outliers*, Penguin 2008), but also a common-sense principle of many forms of skills development, including playing a musical instrument, sports, and language learning. The more time spent on an activity, the better the practitioner becomes. Practice makes perfect. Applied to language study, the principle implies that the more exposure to a language the learner gets, and the more time spent engaging with it, the greater the success. A major problem with classroom-based language study is the

inherent limitation on time available to spend on the language in school, especially where class sizes tend to be large and many other subjects and activities must be fitted into a school day. For functional competence to develop, exposure outside class is essential. For most Irish pupils, however, the opportunities for exposure to Irish outside the classroom are few and far between. Despite some children's programming on television since the launch of TG4, the Irish language television network, Irish is overwhelmed by the much greater presence of English in virtually all domains of society. Access to the spoken language is indeed possible, but it takes a certain amount of effort, effort which many families are not able or prepared to make. Reading can provide access to a much richer range of language, in both form and content, than most children can get through the spoken language alone. Although the availability of children's literature in Irish does not approach the quantity available in English, there is a good deal more than seems to be found in many schools or than teachers may be aware of.

**Vocabulary:** Reading offers an excellent means of building vocabulary, and once pupils are able to read authentic texts at their skill level, it can provide exposure to a greater range of syntax and idiom than is typically found in conversational language. All this, as it is internalised, will enhance learners' language repertoire and make them better communicators. Experimental studies of L2 readers in other languages have confirmed that incidental vocabulary acquisition takes place through reading for comprehension, and experiments that focus specifically on vocabulary acquisition also find reading tasks to be superior to language production tasks for both acquisition and retention of vocabulary. .

## How to use this book

The chapters and exercises here are offered as a means of increasing understanding of the Irish orthographic system in order to help those who are involved with teaching it or wish to improve their own Irish. Some readers may wish to go directly to the analysis in **Chapter 4** and the exercises that follow, which are aimed at adults, but could be adapted for use in classrooms by teachers who have worked through them in advance and know the needs of their own pupils. Some suggestions are given for this, although it is expected that individual learner needs will vary in ways we cannot anticipate.

For readers who want to situate the analysis in the context of how Irish reading is currently taught, and its outcomes, the first three chapters present relevant background and theory. **Chapter 2** discusses current teaching practices regarding Irish reading as related by teachers in English-medium schools, school inspectors and other researchers, and will be of particular interest to pre-service teachers and to teacher educators. **Chapter 3** summarises reports of learning outcomes in Irish and presents arguments for explicit teaching of Irish sound-symbol correspondences.

**Chapter 4** begins the analysis of Irish orthography by outlining some necessary relevant information on concepts related to the analysis of sound systems in language and the terminology that will be used (minimally) in subsequent chapters. The following three chapters discuss, as non-technically as possible, the Irish sound system and its relation to spelling. Examples in these and subsequent chapters are drawn mainly from the most frequent 1000 words in a corpus of Irish children's literature, so examples consist mostly of words commonly used in Irish classrooms. We approach the problem of sound and spelling from different perspectives, covering material in different ways, with the expectation that different readers may respond to some perspectives better than others. **Chapter 5** introduces the system

of consonant sounds, along with the uniquely Irish way of using vowels in spelling to supplement the available supply (inadequate to the Irish sound system) of consonant letters. **Chapter 6** describes the vowel system, explaining, this time from the perspective of vowels, how spelling creatively uses the available vowel letters to handle not only vowel sounds but consonant distinctions not found in English. Together, these chapters illustrate why Irish has so many vowel sequences in many words. **Chapter 7** presents the same information from the point of view of a reader who sees the symbols and needs to understand how they represent pronunciations of the spoken words. In **Chapter 8**, some exceptions to the regular patterns are presented, along with aspects of dialect variation. Finally, **Chapter 9** provides a collection of exercises for raising awareness of the patterns of Irish spelling and the ways they differ from those of English. At the end of each chapter we include references and resources for those who wish to follow up on the topic in that chapter.

## Chapter 1 Further reading and resources

1. Nation (2007) discusses the time-on-task principle with respect to reading as part of an overview of his framework for reading instruction, and gives arguments for teaching all skills and for finding a balance of activities that provide focus on both meaning and form. Nation (2014) discusses the value of vocabulary learning through extensive reading.
2. Grabe (2009), Chapter 13 provides a good discussion of the links between reading and vocabulary development. Day, Omura and Hiramatsu (1991) and Fraser (1999) show in their experimental studies that reading for meaning can lead to incidental vocabulary learning, especially when students receive appropriate instruction in strategies for identifying unfamiliar words. Webb (2005) compared two tasks that specifically target vocabulary learning, a reading task and a language production task. He found the reading task to be more effective on each of ten measures of acquisition. Hickey (1991) describes the study using audiotapes to improve reading enjoyment.
3. Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012), a discussion of the basis of the proposed new Integrated Language Curriculum can be downloaded from:  
[https://www.ncca.ie/en/resources/towards\\_an\\_integrated\\_language\\_curriculum\\_in\\_early\\_childhood\\_and\\_primary\\_education](https://www.ncca.ie/en/resources/towards_an_integrated_language_curriculum_in_early_childhood_and_primary_education)
4. The Primary Language Curriculum and associated resources can be accessed at:  
<https://pdst.ie/literacy/primarylanguagecurriculum>
5. Support materials for teachers that include materials on teaching Phonics for Irish can be accessed from: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language?lang=ga-ie>
6. *An Siopa Leabhar* and [www.litriocht.com](http://www.litriocht.com) are good sources of children's literature in Irish, including both fiction and non-fiction books at a variety of levels. *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG) [www.cogg.ie](http://www.cogg.ie) publishes annual lists of teaching resources for Irish; the 2016 edition has 69 pages of materials.



# Chapter 2

## Teachers' Experience of Teaching Irish Reading

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### Irish and the Curriculum

The Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2015) now in primary schools heralds a new approach to the teaching of English and Irish. Arising from Ó Duibhir and Cummins's (2012) review of research on integrated language teaching, it draws also on recent policy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), Inspectorate evaluations of teaching Irish in primary school (DES, 2007; Hislop, 2013) and other research reviews on developing oral language in the early years (Shiel, Cregan, McGough, & Archer, 2012), on literacy in the early years (Kennedy et al. (2012) and on effective language teaching (Harris & Ó Duibhir, 2011). The new curriculum for English-medium schools lays out learning outcomes and progression continua for oral language as well as for reading and writing in English and Irish. It highlights the importance of using a systematic phonics approach to the teaching of reading in Irish, and the development of word recognition and word attack skills, drawing on children's phonological and phonemic awareness.

The move to the integrated Primary Language Curriculum occurred against a backdrop of overload in the primary school timetable, and ongoing concerns about Irish achievement outcomes under the 1999 curriculum, but it will be some time before its effects on achievement can be evaluated. Central to the new approach is the development of support materials and toolkits to support teachers in their implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum. Pre-service and in-service training for the new curriculum urgently need to address the challenges teachers identify with regard to teaching Irish oral and literacy skills. It is those challenges that relate to reading that we consider here. It is important to consider the impact of the previous (Revised) curriculum for Irish in forming the backdrop to current developments, and shaping the pedagogical approach of a generation of teachers. It is also vital to learn from the gaps between the aspiration and the implementation of the previous curriculum in order to deliver the new integrated curriculum in the most effective way. The previous (Revised) curriculum advocated a communicative approach to Irish that encompassed speaking, listening, reading and writing, but there is some evidence that the notion of 'communicative' was often misinterpreted as referring specifically to oral language skills, with the result that literacy instruction in Irish tended to suffer.

In this chapter we look briefly at the custom and practice among teachers in English-medium schools with regard to teaching Irish reading, since the attitudes and beliefs revealed are highly pertinent to addressing teacher needs to deliver the new curriculum also. The discussion in this chapter (and others) will draw on data from a set of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2013-14 with primary teachers, teacher educators and other language experts (See Stenson and Hickey, 2014). The language experts and teacher educators were asked (in Irish) about their own experiences learning Irish and their views of the challenges faced by learners and teachers in contemporary Irish classrooms. The teachers, interviewed in

English, were asked about their approaches to teaching Irish, their views of where reading fits into the broader curriculum, and the challenges and needs that they perceive for improving the effectiveness of Irish language instruction, particularly with respect to literacy development.

The interviews revealed significant gaps that had emerged between the aspiration and implementation of then current Revised curriculum with regard to the teaching of reading. Exploring the thinking behind such gaps is important if we are to avoid similar divergences in the implementation of the new curriculum. Every teacher interviewed, as well as several of the teacher educators, mentioned a focus on oral skills to the near-exclusion of other skills:

*Is cúrsaí cumarsáide go léir a bhíonn acu, agus cursaí comhrá agus mar sin ann. [It's all communication that they have now, and conversation and such.]*

*My priority has always been getting them to speak it. I really don't care too much about any other aspect of it.*

*What I want for them to do is to be able to speak Irish, to hear it spoken with different accents, to hear it spoken as a real language, and I am much more concerned about that than about teaching them reading...*

Even teachers of senior classes emphasised the predominance of an oral approach to language, and stated that they saw reading as secondary, or supplementary. These responses, as well as the materials in use indicated a neglect of systematic reading instruction, at least in some schools.

*I don't know if teachers explicitly teach reading as much as we probably should.*

*...once a fortnight we would do a reading lesson...*

When asked for recommendations for improving the Irish curriculum, some participants specifically advised a greater emphasis on reading instruction, as illustrated below:

*Caithfidh na múinteoirí tacú leis an léitheoireacht. Ach ní dhéanann siad é... [Teachers need to support reading. But they aren't doing it...]*

*Chuirfinn níos mó béime leis an léitheoireacht féin agus spreagadh chun léitheoireachta. [I'd put more emphasis on reading itself and motivation to read.]*

*I don't think there's enough emphasis on teaching reading...it's all about the phrases - and them speaking Irish and them understanding Irish.*

*It's neglected...Irish in general, but Irish reading [in particular].*

The perception that a communicative approach is mainly about oral communication with little role for reading was highlighted by some teachers' tendency when asked how they teach Irish *reading*, to focus on how they teach oral Irish through games, drama, songs etc. The focus on teaching the spoken language predominated, and many teachers had to be prodded to talk about Irish reading at all. Although several teachers showed an understanding of the importance of reading in language education, there appeared to be little systematicity to the way it was taught, which points to the need to address these skills explicitly in training for the new curriculum.

## Irish reading: Neglect of decoding

The Revised curriculum offered teachers guidelines on developing listening skills and print familiarity through storytelling and reading books to children. Teachers were recommended to

pay explicit attention to language awareness, in order to develop children's understanding of decoding (the process of translating spellings to correct pronunciation of the written word) and of sound-symbol relationships in Irish. They were advised to contrast writing conventions of Irish and English explicitly, in quite an integrated fashion, and to integrate the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening in class activities. While some teachers interviewed reported using some of these recommendations in teaching Irish reading, others showed considerably less engagement with them. When asked to comment on how they build Irish **reading** skills specifically, the majority of participants reported using fairly traditional methods, often relying on how they themselves were taught. There were reports of pupils reading aloud, repeating what the teacher read, reading silently while listening, and using reading to reinforce new vocabulary, spelling tests, and comprehension questions.

What was noticeably missing from most responses was reference to any kind of systematic instruction in decoding the sound-symbol patterns of Irish spelling, conscious development of language awareness in Irish, or discussion of differences between Irish and English. Virtually everyone uses a phonics programme or similar system for teaching English reading, but this was rarely mentioned in the teaching of Irish reading, for which most reported relying on a whole-word recognition approach:

*It was more whole word, definitely, yeah.*

*We focus in on words.*

*In English, I think they're very good at sounding out a word. So they look at, they come to something and they can sound it out. In Irish, they find it much more difficult, they don't even try sometimes, because they're so used to words sounding very different to how they're spelt [in English], -- they haven't been taught.*

*That [decoding] is definitely a part that I neglect a bit.*

*I think it's just an assumption that we have made that there's no, you know that you teach English reading using phonics, and I think that ... we don't do it formally [in Irish] and there are posters and there are things to help you, but that actually, we just give them 'ordóg' and we write up o-r-d-ó-g and we say 'ordóg' and we expect--and you know we sort of show them that it's a thumb, but we don't...make them say it out o-r-d-ó-g, you know.... And I think that it's madness that we expect them to just kind of, that they will grasp this without any explanations really.*

Several other teachers commented on teaching the spelling and reading of individual words and a few reported efforts to teach individual sound-spelling correspondences (the <bh> = /v/ pattern was mentioned most often, but curiously, no one mentioned teaching that <mh> has the same phonetic value), but there appears to be nothing systematic offered in most classrooms. One teacher reported using an Irish spelling workbook series as a way of covering sound-symbol correspondences, but observed that use of structured materials in teaching Irish reading was infrequent among colleagues, both within and outside her school.

*We were working from a book called [Title], which is, I just found ...it was just learning spellings randomly in a topic, under a heading like, you know, 'An Scoil' or something, but [Title of different book] gave me a structure...last week we spoke about <aoi > words and all the words like 'Aoife,' and all that, and there are activities based on <aoi> for that week.*

Several teachers indicated that they see a value to explicit spelling and decoding instruction in Irish.

*And there's no step-by-step—like with Jolly Phonics, or your English...levels. They just are launched into reading...in First Class, where they're supposed to see words for the first time. It's supposed to be all oral until then. But, I mean, then just to launch straight into reading full sentences is asking a lot.*

*People just kind of assume that they're going to learn. And yet you would never do that if you were teaching Spanish or French or any other language, you know, you don't just assume that people know a Spanish <j>is a 'jota', you know... And when I make them say it out, <m-i-s-e>= mi-se, actually you can hear them going 'ooohhh', because we don't formally teach it.*

Although some teachers used the term 'phonics' to refer to any instruction in sound-spelling relations, only two of the teachers interviewed reported using a formal phonics programme for teaching Irish reading. One of these was teaching in a special pilot Irish programme within the school and the other had acquired some phonics materials during a year of teaching abroad. In general, though, they indicated seeing little enthusiasm from colleagues for taking up such instruction as a regular part of the school curriculum, and most teachers seemed unaware of the existence of these teaching resources. Teachers who reported trying to teach phonics or other formal means of presenting spelling rules seemed to feel alone among their colleagues.

*We're not using it officially across the school...but we do use it in the classroom here, there's a programme called Fónaic na Gaeilge. I would love to see it being used across the board, across the school in every Irish class.*

There was a perception that the use of such materials required expertise that was only available among teachers with a particular interest in languages, signalling the need to promote a more explicit understanding among teachers of how Irish spelling works.

*No, I don't [think colleagues teach decoding]. No I would say they don't. I would believe you would have to have a certain passion for languages to...And I think, do they even do it? I often wonder, are they just learning spellings every week for the test on Friday?*

Dónal Ó Faoláin (2006) arguing the need to provide phonics instruction in Irish classes, confirms the historical roots of this pattern:

*The teaching of reading in Irish has had a tradition of using primarily the 'look and say' method with a large portion of contextual reading thrown in for good measure ...[Until recently] in Irish a new word had to be heard before it could be read...This gave rise to a lack of clarity of structure which left the weaker pupil struggling with word identification and the more advanced pupil with difficulties in reading outside a very narrow curriculum. (Ó Faoláin 2006:67)*

Previous studies have confirmed the reluctance to teach sound-symbol correspondences in Irish, whether through a phonics programme or any other means. DES (2007) examined the teaching of Irish based on observations in 40 schools. They found many classrooms, especially in junior classes, where Irish reading was not formally taught at all. There was little attention to word analysis skills in any of the classes observed, with the result that many pupils had difficulty reading even common words, and could not identify words already learned orally. The inspectors attributed the widespread failure to identify even common vocabulary in reading, to pupils' general lack of decoding skills. A 2013 Inspectorate report also found significantly less positive outcomes in both oral Irish and Irish reading compared to English and mathematics, and confirmed the need for a change of approach.

The widespread neglect of systematic decoding instruction seems to be a direct reflection of how teachers themselves remember learning to read a generation earlier.

*I'm very confident speaking Irish in the class.... But written Irish on the board, I'm always afraid of making mistakes, and that is where I'm not confident....and you know I never learned fadas, I never learned about the fuaimeanna myself. I never learned. Nobody ever explained it to me. I never got clarification on how to spell in Irish, so how am I expected to give clarification to my students?*

In designing supports for teachers for the Primary Language Curriculum, it is important to recognise the impact of how teachers themselves learned the Irish orthographic system, since this is fundamental to their difficulties in explaining how Irish spelling works.

*We were taught by look-say all the way up, which is fine when you have a good enough memory, and children who have good enough working memory can cope with that, but those who don't then are overloaded, and it's just very confusing for them....*

*... the spelling rules in Irish, I don't think I was ever taught them. So I would find that very hard to teach... look-say was the big emphasis, so I suppose [in] Irish, I tended to replicate that, whereas in English I would've moved more with research recommendations and trying to use a balanced approach, but, that didn't come into my Irish.*

*You see, I don't ever remember learning rules [for Irish spelling], it's just instinctive, so it's hard to teach somebody when it's instinctive in you.*

## Preparation and language skills

Many of the teachers interviewed reported feeling unprepared to teach Irish reading, and decoding skills in particular, because this is not typically a strand of their pre-service training:

*I would have a background in literacy teaching, English, teaching reading and have done a lot of research myself in that area, but when it comes—I don't automatically transfer that knowledge to teaching Irish reading, that link has never...up until this point there were two separate curriculums as such, and ... I didn't really think of teaching Irish in the same way [as English].*

It is hoped that the integrated approach in the Primary Language Curriculum will help teachers to extend their expertise in the teaching of English literacy to Irish. However, teachers also need subject-specific understanding of how Irish spelling works in order to implement that curriculum fully. When asked what is most needed to help teachers improve children's Irish reading skills, one teacher gave this bottom line:

*..The most help for teachers - maybe to be taught how to teach [Irish] reading, rather than making it up yourself.*

Reflecting on the pre-service training offered, the teacher educators who were interviewed confirmed that little attention is given in colleges of education to Irish reading instruction or how Irish orthography works.

*Ní chaithim féin mórán ama ag ullmhú múinteoirí don léitheoireacht. [I personally don't spend much time preparing teachers for reading.]*

*Nuair a bhí mé ag múineadh Gaeilge do na múinteoirí sin, ní raibh aird dírithe ar litriú ar chor ar bith. [When I was teaching Irish to those teachers, there was no attention at all to spelling.]*

Educators reported that instruction is provided for the teaching of reading English and indicated that it is assumed teachers can carry this into the teaching of Irish. Indeed, 'literacy'

as discussed in terms of policy is often critically perceived to relate to English literacy only. However, it is not clear that techniques for teaching English can translate that easily to Irish, due to the differences in the orthographic systems. Given the lack of formal preparation to teach Irish reading, it is understandable that teachers feel somewhat at a loss and perhaps choose to focus their already limited time on oral skills, grammar, or whatever else they feel more comfortable doing.

Another reason for the limited attention to deciphering Irish orthographic conventions seems to lie with teachers' low confidence in their own Irish skills in general, and to their reading/writing skills in particular. Most of the teachers interviewed expressed uncertainty about their own understanding of the Irish spelling system and the patterns to be found therein. Those who were more confident expressed a sense that they were unusual among their colleagues:

*I think the biggest challenge is a lot of people are worried about their own levels, going "I'm not good enough," you know, "I'm too nervous. I'm gonna make a mistake," and teachers sometimes drop back into English maybe quicker than they should.*

*...and I suppose some teachers aren't comfortable with the language, and I just think it would develop an overall base, to make them comfortable, you know, where they mightn't be comfortable in one area, that they could pull from the other areas.*

Use of Irish among teachers in the school was mentioned more than once by those who do use the language with colleagues as a motivator both for teachers and for students, who overhear the language used as a real communication tool. Those whose schools don't offer such supports sometimes wish they did and feel that such communication would help improve their skills and confidence:

*I've lost it again [fluency, gained on a summer Gaeltacht course] because we don't speak Irish in the school. And it's not encouraged and teachers are afraid to show how poor they are with their Irish. And we'd all get better if we [spoke it more].*

## Materials and resources

The availability of suitable teaching materials was identified by many teachers interviewed as a barrier to implementing best practice in reading instruction (see Hickey & Stenson, 2016 for further discussion). Both the DES (2008) report and Hislop's (2013) report also commented on shortcomings with regard to the use and availability of resources. In particular, they found a strong tendency to rely heavily on the general Irish textbook for most Irish reading activities. These textbooks are typically not designed as readers, but as general language texts for vocabulary and grammar instruction. They contain relatively little connected text, and what text there is mainly supports the curricular themes, and therefore seems to serve more for consolidation and review of the general (usually oral) Irish lesson. These textbooks offer little in the way of challenge or interest for pupils and provide little opportunity for true reading practice, either for pleasure or for gathering information. Inspectors noted that children in classrooms relying on the primary text were exposed to only a very narrow selection of Irish texts in their classrooms, with little exposure to real books or variety in Irish reading materials. They found that the texts on which most Irish reading activities were based were "essentially workbooks" and over half of classrooms (52%) were evaluated as needing to give pupils more challenging reading material in Irish, since it was observed that pupils learned very little from the reading activities in these textbooks. Teachers' comments in interviews with us support these observations.

When asked what materials they use to teach reading, most teachers we interviewed also referred first to the Irish textbooks their schools use. But several went on to state that they did in fact consider the provision of interesting reading materials to be of high importance, and that the regular textbook fell short.

*To teach reading you need good materials, and the Irish, for want of a better term the Irish books are very unsexy, you know? They're very, you know, a lot of Neasa and Rossa ... I'd be dead [though] without it, to be honest. Because you could be a corpse and teach that stuff (laughter).*

*We need ... to supplement the texts that are available, and just to have more varied reading materials in Irish.*

*So having different readers available to the children, where it keeps things fresh, it keeps it new, and yet you're seeing the same words all the time.*

*I think that [in] the books that they have to read, there's a mismatch between what they are able to read and the level of interest.*

*No, I wouldn't stick with the textbook; the textbook is boring for a start, so stay away from the textbook; that is rule number one.*

*The class textbook is [Title]. There's lots of kind of cartoon stories, and again I just didn't feel that there's enough challenge ...or enough of an interest in those stories.*

However, many teachers interviewed also commented on the difficulty of sourcing books and providing interesting and challenging activities in Irish; partly due to lack of time for preparation. It is probably safe to assume that teachers who agreed to be interviewed are likely to be among the most enthusiastic and confident about teaching Irish, and while some showed a good deal of creativity in finding reading material for their pupils, they acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining the effort, and indicated that not all of their colleagues were prepared to make the effort at all.

*Originally when I started teaching Irish, in primary school, I was using more a very active [approach], using puppets, and lots of different activities ... but it was taking an awful lot of my energy as a teacher. So gradually, as a teacher, I've had to space out my energies, so I have become more reliant on the books.*

Simply providing better resources and materials to support the new curriculum will not be sufficient, if teachers do not feel equipped to use them:

*There were all these books in the school in classrooms that had an Irish library, but no one was reading them...I just rounded up all the Irish books, there was a huge resource of Irish books, and I'd ask teachers if they used them and they were going "noo"—they were using the textbook.*

*And then I think that a lot of teachers like to stick to, you know, where the whole class has one reader? Like I was saying, you know, working in older classes, that that's --you know, when you're teaching Irish through English, that sticking to the one reader.*

The teachers' comments about the current inadequacy of teaching materials were divided between a need for a better supply of general reading materials and need for materials to teach phonics for Irish. With regard to general reading materials, there was a consensus that one of the most serious problems lies with the mismatch between the interest level of the texts available for a particular class, and children's Irish language abilities at that level.

*I think there's a real dearth of novels with more - that would cater for children who, you know, have quite a low standard of Irish, really, but have more of a higher interest content.*

*I'm working now with Sixth Class and some of the stories about the 'timpiste' you know, he fell and hurt his leg, and do you know, they're not stimulating for the class.*

Initiatives to provide more materials under the Primary Language Curriculum need to take into account the difficulties up to now in raising teachers' awareness of materials already in existence. The few teachers using formal phonics materials praised these as effective, but noted that most of their colleagues are unaware of such materials or uninterested in using them.

*[I'm] really really happy with it. It's just called Fónaic na Gaeilge and it's wonderful, because it's like pictures and stories that go along with the letters and, you know, it makes it easier for the child to identify the letter and the letter sound.*

*I think the phonics programme that, you know that was made is very good, but I'm sure that only a handful of schools actually know that it exists, you know. No idea, you know!*

*There are huge resources out there ... but I think sometimes finding the resources can be tricky for teachers, unless it's right there in front of them or on their shelf, they wouldn't use it ... Yeah, are they readily available is the question.*

Most of the participants did not show any awareness of such materials. When asked about the greatest needs for improving reading instruction, many mentioned the lack of such materials, seemingly unaware that they were in use, sometimes even in the same school.

*If there was like a programme, like a phonics programme like there is for English, that would be helpful.*

One teacher expressed a wish for graded readers, which was also mentioned as an urgent need in successive reports from the Inspectorate over the last decade. This teacher is trying to build a graded library of Irish books from those materials that the school already has, but finds that the vocabulary can be somewhat haphazard in books not designed to go together:

*I suppose resources would be kind of handy...like having a graded scheme where you could, like--'cause ... there's bigger jumps than I would like [in the difficulty of the reading matter], and even kind of a build up of the words, like, if you, you know, like if you were focusing on the first 200 words, and you're using those and you're hitting the same words again.*

The *Séideán Sí* series is an integrated programme for teaching Irish, with DVD and on line support, which was developed for Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools. While these materials are available for use in mainstream English-medium schools, many teachers find the language level of these books too challenging for pupils who are only exposed to the language a few hours a week. Use of these materials with senior classes is sometimes reported, as there is no comparable series for children in English-medium schools. The Inspectorate has repeatedly called for development of such a series in its reports, and it is hoped that a programme for 3rd-6th class will be developed in tandem with the Integrated Language Curriculum for these classes. However, while curriculum reform gives a new impetus in producing materials, it is critical that teachers are fully aware of what is available and feel adequately supported to use them.

## Institutional Support

The introduction of a new curriculum can lead to teachers' feeling overloaded as they adjust to new pedagogical practices and materials. Teachers interviewed reported some confusion about conflicting demands: recent concern with improving literacy and numeracy were seen as having negative repercussions for Irish instruction, and there was concern that time for Irish may be further diminished as a result:

*Well, for example, in English, now, we, and this ...is to the detriment of Irish, now, there's a huge drive on numeracy and literacy in the classrooms, and so you hear other teachers going 'Oh so and so, they had a whole school evaluation and the inspector didn't care about the Irish, it was all about the English and the maths,' and you see, everyone's hearing that. You know, and I mean, you're going, 'Literacy, surely Irish is part of literacy.'*

A number of teachers reported a sense of isolation with regard to the teaching of reading:

*But it would be good if we got more training.... if the whole school was sort of on the same wavelength, because we all kind of go into the classroom and do our own thing, but I don't know what they do next door.*

*Teaching is such an individual activity, and teachers don't always appreciate if you have a suggestion, they like to teach it their way. It kind of comes down to the culture of teaching and the culture of the school. It's a pity we don't share.*

These comments highlight the critical need for in-service training in the Primary Language Curriculum to incorporate more sharing of best practice and better coordination among teachers within a school to ensure progression continua.

## Concluding remarks

The interviews with teachers confirmed other studies in revealing a lack of preparation (at pre-service and in-service level) for the teaching of Irish reading as a factor leading to the widespread neglect of Irish reading instruction. Teachers' lack of confidence in their own understanding of Irish orthography was also a source of concern. This book aims to offer some support for those teachers who wish to systematise their approach to Irish literacy by including instruction focused on the relationship between sounds and spelling, i.e., on decoding the written word.

Certain other implicit assumptions about the teaching of Irish emerged in the conversations with teachers and teacher educators reported in this chapter. These include the assumption that, when they begin formal Irish reading, the skills that children have previously learned for English reading will transfer automatically to their Irish reading, without further assistance apart from exposure to reading material. A related assumption is, repeatedly expressed both in interviews and to an extent in the research literature, that Irish spelling, being more regular than that of English, is easier to learn, and therefore need not be explicitly taught. Both these assumptions are myths, which we will tackle in the next chapter, as part of arguing for the inclusion of formal decoding instruction in the Irish lesson.

The Primary Language Curriculum is currently being phased in, which will impact significantly on how Irish reading is approached. The Integrated curriculum offers interesting opportunities for rethinking reading education, and may help to provide some of the changes teachers mentioned in the interviews, such as better use of the techniques of instruction that

are accepted as working for English reading. However, it is imperative that these techniques are adapted for the orthography, or spelling system of Irish, and the later chapters of this handbook provide a sampling of resources for doing just that.

## Chapter 2 Further reading and resources

1. Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) offer a discussion of the basis of the Integrated Curriculum, which can be downloaded from:  
[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Reports/Towards\\_an\\_Integrated\\_Language\\_Curriculum\\_in\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_and\\_Primary\\_Education.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Reports/Towards_an_Integrated_Language_Curriculum_in_Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education.pdf)
2. Details of the Primary Language Curriculum and associated resources can be accessed at: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language>
3. The U.S. National Reading Panel report (NICCHD, 2000) surveys the research addressing the debate on reading methodologies and presents the evidence behind recommendations for a multiple-strategies approach to teaching reading that included decoding instruction. The full report and executive summary are available on line at: <https://lincs.ed.gov/communications/NRP> or <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/documents/report.pdf>
4. Other studies that have looked at teaching practices, and the reluctance to teach decoding skills include Hickey (2007), Ó Faoláin (2006), and Harris *et al.* (2006). The reports from teachers and other language specialists are discussed in more detail in Stenson and Hickey (2014) and Hickey and Stenson (2016).

## Resources for phonics instruction

1. *Fónaic na Gaeilge*, the phonics programme from *Aisaonad* mentioned by some of the participants in the interviews, can be downloaded from [http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fónaic/Fónaic\\_na\\_Gaeilge.html](http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fónaic/Fónaic_na_Gaeilge.html)
2. Muintearas also offer a series of workbooks. <http://www.muintearas.com/leabhar.htm>
3. Many other support materials, including pictures, posters, and games to accompany the phonics programme, as well as a second phonics programme that builds on *Fónaic na Gaeilge* are available under the Gaeloideachas link at <http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/>.

## Chapter 3

# Why Teach Decoding in Irish?

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The unsystematic approach to the teaching of reading reported in the last chapter, and indeed the apparent neglect of reading in many classrooms, has not served teachers or learners particularly well, by all appearances. Studies of outcomes in the learning of Irish, both from the Inspectorate and from independent researchers, have revealed a number of problems in the achievement of pupils in mainstream schools. In fact, there seems to have been a decline in rates of achievement in both written and spoken language in recent decades, despite the commendable attention to oral skills in primary school classrooms. As discussed in Chapter 2, in an integrated approach to language teaching, the development of oral conversational Irish would be augmented or balanced by attention to written language, as a source of language input that can enhance learners' progress in contexts where access to the spoken language is limited. This chapter will offer arguments that greater attention to preparing pupils explicitly to cope with the Irish spelling system in the early years of Irish reading instruction may help not only to increase reading skills, thereby improving vocabulary and grammar, but also ultimately to improve oral language skills and build a greater appreciation of the value of language study.

Literacy scholarship has, for the last century or more, been embroiled in a vigorous debate about how reading should be taught. Popularly referred to as "the reading wars," the debate, briefly stated, contrasts meaning-based and form-based methodologies of literacy instruction, linked to differing views of the reading process in terms of 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' processing. The top-down view holds that an understanding of written language emerges naturally from oral language development, relying entirely on the same cognitive mechanisms used for speech, given social and educational support for literacy. This view is associated with whole-language approaches to reading, in which meaning takes precedence over all else and is constructed from text by use of contextual cues, background information, and recognition of text at the word level. The bottom-up approach to literacy on the other hand views text processing as including the decoding of the relations between sound and symbol, and usually includes some kind of phonics instruction as part of the curriculum. The mental association of spellings with sounds and the process of learning to make that association is what we refer to here, and in what follows, as *decoding*.

Nowadays, there is a growing acceptance that both top-down (meaning-based) and bottom-up (form-based) processing are involved in skilled reading, and that the skills and strategies developed in both kinds of instruction are essential for fluent reading. Major reports from numerous research bodies and educational associations in both Europe and the U.S. have gone on record to claim a) that there is no one way to teach reading; b) that individuals may differ in the ways they learn best; and c) that an approach that encompasses both lexical level (whole word) and sound-symbol decoding instruction is the most likely to be successful.

This chapter will present the case for incorporating instruction in bottom-up processing, which we characterise by the general term *decoding*, as part of the literacy development of young Irish readers. After defining a few terms, we begin with a survey of the Irish achievement outcomes that have been reported by Irish school inspectors and psycholinguistic

researchers, and argue that the poor outcomes are due in part to deficiencies related to the instructional methods reported in the last chapter and are seemingly typical of Irish classrooms.

## Phonics: Definitions

A glance at the Internet reveals numerous, sometimes conflicting, definitions of phonics, some of which overlap with other terms of wider currency and greater precision. The definitions below show how this and related terms will be used in this handbook.

**Decoding** is a general term for any form of analysis (conscious or not) that individuals use to identify and recognise the relationship between the units used to write a particular language and the units of the spoken language that those symbols represent. In writing systems that use an alphabet, the spoken units represented are called *phonemes*, to be discussed further in the next chapter, and the written units with which they are associated are the letters of the alphabet, or sometimes sequences of letters, called *graphemes*. Decoding may also be involved in the reading of non-alphabetic writing systems, but we have no need to deal with that here.

**Phonics** is a specific **method** of reading instruction based on decoding processes that call attention to the relationship between sounds and letters in alphabetic writing systems. There are actually several different phonics programmes on the market, which overlap in many ways but differ in others. All involve the teaching of decoding, but not all decoding activities are necessarily phonics.

**Phonetics** is the scientific study of speech sounds, and includes

- **Articulatory phonetics** (the study of how sounds, also called *phones*, are produced by the organs of speech);
- **Acoustic phonetics** (the study of the physical properties of sound waves produced during speech); and
- **Auditory phonetics** (the study of how listeners perceive the phonetic signal).

The term is also sometimes used to refer to L2 learners' pronunciations (the term we will use here). When we use the term 'phonetics' in this handbook, we will usually be referring to articulatory phonetics.

We start by presenting recent findings about achievement outcomes in Irish from the teaching practices described in the last chapter and follow with arguments for why attention to decoding can help improve them. The intent here is not to replace, but rather to supplement, other forms of reading instruction.

## Outcomes in Irish achievement

A number of studies of Irish language achievement over the past decade, from both the Inspectorate and independent scholars, have shown significant declines in the standard of Irish in comparison to national assessments from the 1980s. According to one study conducted in 2006, only about a third of 12-year old pupils tested in mainstream (English medium) schools had achieved mastery of the target objectives in spoken Irish for their class level, and almost

half failed to show even minimum progress. The researchers also found that schools differed more on Irish reading scores than they did on English reading or mathematics scores, confirming parental reports regarding their children’s greater difficulties in reading Irish, and indicating greater variability amongst English-medium schools in the teaching of Irish reading than in the teaching of English reading or mathematics. Inspectorate reports from 2007 and 2013, confirm these findings of shortcomings with regard to the use of resources in 20% of classrooms, leading to the conclusion that “a sizable proportion of primary schools need to change their approach to the teaching of the Irish language.” In the 2013 report, significantly less positive outcomes in Irish and Irish reading were reported compared to English and mathematics, and inspectors concluded that teaching was problematic in as many as 24% of lessons observed and reiterated that a change of approach was called for.

The position taken in this handbook is that increased systematicity in Irish reading instruction, both within and across classrooms, would be helpful in advancing reading development. Among the needs identified for improving reading achievement are the following:

1. A systematic approach to goals at each class level so that teachers know what to expect from incoming students. Communication regarding what is taught at each level is essential, so that lessons progress and do not become repetitious and boring, but progress the treatment of the curricular themes from one year to the next. Sharing specific goals for reading achievement and the methods and materials that individual teachers find successful would help provide for continuity of approach within the school and raise awareness of where problems need to be addressed. It would also make clear what classrooms need in the way of materials and the kinds of support for reading instruction required from school administrations and the DES.
2. Avoidance of heavy reliance on the textbook and worksheet activities as the primary reading activities.
3. Encouraging reading for pleasure in Irish.
4. Help for children in building their reading skills and vocabulary by extensive reading.

Explicit teaching of bottom-up decoding skills, widely used in the teaching of English reading but unaccountably used far less often for Irish, is one aspect of reading instruction that could be helpful in achieving improvement of children’s reading skills in Irish. We present several arguments next for adding this approach to Irish instruction.

## **Research support for explicit decoding instruction**

First, a large body of research dating back several decades indicates that decoding ability and the linguistic awareness on which this depends are essential components of literacy acquisition. This research includes psychological and psycholinguistic studies of text processing and reading acquisition, as well as classroom based studies of literacy education outcomes. Two seminal books on reading by Chall (1967) and Adams (1990) both present the case for inclusion of phonics instruction in reading curricula. Much subsequent research has focused on various aspects of the reading process with respect to the role of phonological knowledge in decoding words and building fluency. We will mention several elements of the process here; for those interested in reading further, suggestions are listed at the end of the chapter, with full citations in the bibliography. First, there is significant evidence from studies of young readers of English that, after knowledge of the alphabet, the most significant factor predictive of reading success is phonological awareness, that is, the ability to break down the

stream of speech in words into smaller units, such as syllables, parts of syllables (rimes and onsets) and individual speech sounds. Phonological awareness is widely recognised as a prerequisite to decoding ability; clearly, identifying sound-symbol relationships in written language is possible only when the sounds that the symbols represent are identifiable in the spoken language. Stuart, Masterson and Dixon (1999) argue that development of good decoding skills is what distinguishes better from weaker readers, who rely unduly on sight vocabulary learned as wholes, and Pikulski and Chard (2005) make explicit the link between decoding and reading fluency.

An influential theory of reading proposed by Linnea Ehri identifies several phases of reading development through which beginning readers of alphabetic orthographies progress. The developmental stages in her framework crucially depend on how readers process written text in terms of the distinctive sounds of the language they are learning to read. In the earliest phase, *pre-alphabetic*, children have no awareness of the relations between sounds and letters, and rely on purely visual cues such as pictures to identify words. The next phase, the *partial alphabetic phase* is characterised by limited knowledge of letter-sound pairings but primary reliance is on initial or other salient letters in words. In the *full alphabetic phase*, children can match all the letters with sounds and segment words into phonemic units; in other words, they are able to decode text. Finally, in the *consolidated alphabetic phase* they can extract larger patterns of letter-groupings across different words (e.g., <ight> in English, or <adha> in Irish) and store them as units, enabling them to read more quickly and remember multisyllabic words by sight. Ehri claims that sound-symbol correspondences are the "glue" that helps beginning readers hold words in memory, whereas the whole-word route to learning is less effective, a claim that has been supported by a vast number of studies showing the value of decoding skills in advancing reading ability.

The results of several psycholinguistic studies of Irish learners point to a lack of decoding skills as a central roadblock in the development of Irish reading fluency. Many of these findings converge on problems with Irish phonological awareness on the part of young readers, and a failure to decode Irish text in the ways they have learned to decode English text. Parsons and Lyddy examined the Irish reading of 8 year olds in different types of schools. They found that the commonest reading strategy for unknown Irish words was refusal to attempt to read the word, followed by Irish or English word substitutions. In contrast, the most proficient readers rarely refused to attempt an Irish word, and were more likely to make non-word errors, i.e., produce a nonsense word that they had sounded out from their understanding of the spelling patterns. The high prevalence of refusal to attempt a word suggests a reliance on whole word recognition and a lack of decoding strategies, whereas the more successful readers' non-word errors point to greater use of letter-to-sound decoding strategies. The observation of English word-substitution errors among children reading Irish points to interference from English. This interference was especially prominent among the weakest Irish readers, and was also noted in work by Hickey, who observed words such as *ann* /a:n/ being misread as the English name *Ann* /æn/ or *siad* /s'iəd/ as English *said* /sed/. Hickey also found that even high frequency words, with completely regular sound-spelling correspondences, were often misread by children in English-medium primary schools, and argued that this was evidence that children were engaging in guessing rather than decoding. The conclusion seems inescapable: fluency depends on decoding skills, and these skills need to be developed from the earliest stages of reading.

In terms of classroom implications of this research, virtually every official organisation with an interest in literacy that has issued a position statement on the matter has come down on the side of eclectic approaches to teaching reading. These include the International Literacy Association, the European Commission, the U.S. National Reading Panel, the UK Literacy Association, and the Irish National Council on Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), among others.

Much of the research cited above on literacy development was conducted with children learning to read their native language, and these children enter school with a high level of oral skill. In contrast, most school children in Ireland have only begun to acquire spoken Irish as a second language when they begin formal Irish reading instruction. Their L2 skills, in terms of vocabulary and grammar, are still quite limited compared to what native speakers know of their first language at the same age. These limitations mean that learners need all the help they can get to avoid developing inefficient reading strategies. Verhoeven (2000) showed that the smaller second-language vocabularies of L2 learners seriously impede their reading. Limited L2 proficiency may short-circuit the L2 reading process and cause even good L1 readers to revert to less effective strategies in their L2. Limited proficiency also impedes reading processing in other ways. Restricted knowledge of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules and orthographic constraints of the L2 means that the lower-level decoding takes up more processing time than it does for reading in one's first language. Even advanced L2 learners with good L1 reading skills read differently in their L2 because their less automatic L2 word recognition skills impede their ability to focus on text meaning.

There is evidence to this effect in Irish reading. Both Hickey (2007) and Parsons and Lyddy (2009a, b) have found that children in mainstream schools read Irish significantly more slowly and with more errors than children in Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna, where Irish reading proficiency is more advanced due to greater exposure to the language. Reading rate is improved by practice, but it is those readers with the slowest rate who find reading most difficult and unrewarding. Stanovich (1986) coined the term 'Matthew Effect' to describe the situation whereby learners who develop automated word recognition skills with practice become better readers while poor readers who find reading frustrating fall even further behind (analogous to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer). Some children, having early success at reading, therefore read more, enjoy it more, and make rapid gains in their literacy development, whereas those who experience early failure resist further reading, get less exposure to the language, further hampering their skills development. The lesson is clear: early success is important. Cyclical effects can be seen in the relationship between vocabulary growth and reading: as noted previously, reading has been shown to improve vocabulary and the better the vocabulary, the faster reading skill advances. Early decoding instruction has positive effects leading to the opportunity to establish codes in memory, which lead to better future lexical access, and more efficient text processing.

One problem facing children who are acquiring literacy in Irish as their L2 is that the Irish sounds represented by the letters often differ subtly but importantly from the sounds those same letters represent in English. This sets the scene for the possibility of interference from the decoding skills that children have already begun to acquire in English at the time they start reading Irish.

The notion of interference goes back well over 50 years in studies of bilingualism. In second language acquisition (SLA) research, the term *transfer* has become the preferred term, because it lacks the negative connotations of the earlier term, and is more flexible in terms of the effects it may have on SLA. Transfer is most frequently discussed in explicating

similarities and differences of linguistic structure, with attendant effects on the pronunciation and grammatical forms used by learners in their second language, but it can be found in a variety of other domains as well, including the semantic range of similar (even cognate) vocabulary items, discourse structure used in writing, and orthographic patterns of sound-symbol relations, as will be examined here.

In fact, the term *transfer* allows for the possibility that transfer of linguistic knowledge to a second language may be either positive or negative in its effects on language acquisition, depending on what structural features the two languages share. For example, Irish and English share very similar progressive constructions (*Tá Bríd ag imeacht/Bridget is leaving*), which make those forms relatively easy to learn for speakers of the other language, at least in the simplest cases such as the one given here. On the other hand, the two languages have different word orders (not only in the position of the verb, but in smaller phrasal units as well), which must be explicitly learned, and can in early stages of language acquisition lead to errors in which the order of the first language (e.g., *red hat*) may be transferred to the second (*\*dearg hata* instead of *hata dearg*). Such errors have been attested in language learning settings, both among adult learners in English-speaking settings, and among children raised bilingually.

With regard to reading in a second language, considerable attention has been given to questions of precisely what will transfer positively without explicit instruction and what will not. Decoding skills, in general, are among those that do not transfer readily, not only in cases where the two languages use different alphabets (such as the Latin and the Cyrillic, used for Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, etc.) but also where the letters of the same alphabet have different values, which is almost always the case, due to differences in the phonological systems of languages. Compare for example, the pronunciation of the spelling <ch> in French, Spanish, and Italian, all closely related Romance languages, but each different from the others in the sound represented by the same sequence of letters.

There is evidence from reading research that, on the whole, higher order cognitive processes, that are engaged in L1 reading, transfer without instruction to L2. These include:

- aspects of phonological awareness such as recognition of rhyming syllables, and the significance of minimal pairs (see chapters 6-8 for further discussion),
- strategies for extracting meaning from text,
- ability to categorise and subcategorise,
- writing conventions such as linear order; capitalisation; punctuation etc.;
- understanding of the forms of stories and differences among genres; and
- sensitivity to statistical patterns of spelling, such as what letters can be doubled, or can appear next to each other.

What does not transfer, or may transfer negatively, is information about the specific features that differ in the two languages, namely the language-specific sound-symbol correspondences. Where specific sequences of the L2 do not exist in the L1, transfer does not occur, but learners will need to be taught what oral forms correspond to sequences like (in Irish, for example) <bhf>, <ao>, <eoi>, <mh>, and <dh>. Where the same sequences occur in the two languages, negative transfer may result if the sounds they correspond to are different. Thus, for example, some teachers of Irish report pronunciations of homographs (same spelling in the two languages) like *bean* or *teach* with their English values, and even where an English homograph does not exist, the English values may be given to familiar sequences (e.g., *shona*, *sean*, *baile*, *tigh*, etc.). For example, adult students who are several months into the study of Irish have been observed to persist in pronouncing the sequence <th> in words like *bóthar*,

*theach* with one of the English values of the sequence, either as in *mother*, or as in *think*. Because the sounds and spelling correspondences of each language are unique to that language, decoding has to be learned anew for each language studied.

Thus, without explicit instruction and systematic practice in the Irish orthographic conventions, children in the process of becoming biliterate, who have received explicit decoding instruction only in English, may well have trouble keeping track of the decoding rules for the two languages. Although the concept of the significance of minimal pairs seems to transfer, it should be noted that children learning an L2 may still need help with contrasts not found in their mother-tongue (L1). This begins as part of phonological awareness, even before literacy instruction begins. So this is an area where Infants class teachers can begin to prepare their pupils for later reading by focusing on pairs of sounds that are critically different in Irish but not distinguished in English (e.g., broad and slender consonants) or not distinguished in quite the same way in all cases (e.g., long and short vowels).

The Primary Language Curriculum recommends the development of children's language awareness through exercises using a compare and contrast type approach. This is not dissimilar to the previous Revised Curriculum Guidelines which advised teachers to engage in an analysis of similarities and differences between Irish and English sound-symbol correspondences, showing that the authors of the curriculum recognised the possibility of negative transfer. As interviews reported in the previous chapter indicate, however, in the absence of specific support materials, this advice was followed only rather unsystematically, and typically with only a few -- often the simplest -- spelling sequences.

One way in which English and Irish are similar is not necessarily helpful for beginning readers. Both languages have a rather high level of ambiguity in their spelling systems; that is, a single sound may be represented by a variety of different graphemes and a single grapheme may represent more than one sound. For example, in English the same /ai/ sound can be represented by the spellings in bold in the following words:

**I**, kite, **sigh**, **my**.

In Irish, the same /ai/ sound may be written as in

**Tadhg**, **aghaidh**, **staighre**; [and in some dialects *greim* and *tinn*]

Conversely, the English spelling <ough> is famously pronounced differently in *tough*, *though*, *through*, *bough*, and *cough*, as the Irish spelling <aigh> may be (again, depending on dialect) in *faigh*, *bhfaighidh*, *staighre*. A great deal of crosslinguistic research into the acquisition of reading in different orthographies (e.g. Ziegler & Goswami, 2006) has shown that this sort of ambiguity matters, as we shall show in the review that follows.

This body of research extends back at least 30 years and has investigated the relationship between acquisition of literacy in different languages and the nature of the orthographic system in those languages. Results show that even among languages that share a single alphabetic system as the basis of their orthography (such as the Latin alphabet used in English, Irish, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Finnish, Croatian, Turkish, Danish and many others), differences can be identified in what has come to be known as Orthographic Depth, or Opacity. A continuum of Orthographic Depth has been established by this research, in which languages at the Shallow, or Transparent, end, such as Finnish, Turkish, Croatian and to a lesser degree Italian and Spanish, have relatively little ambiguity in spellings; the relationship between sounds and symbols is close to one-to-one, where every spelling unit represents one and only one sound and every sound is spelled only one way. Of the languages

mentioned, Finnish, Croatian and Turkish are perhaps the closest to this ideal, but Spanish and Italian are not far behind. English is generally accepted as the poster child for the other end of the continuum, the Deep or Opaque orthography, with French, Danish and Portuguese falling somewhere in between. No systematic study of Irish orthography has been conducted using the same criteria that were used to determine depth of these orthographies; however, most accounts describe it as more transparent than English, but not as transparent as Finnish or Spanish, for example. Although this conclusion seems reasonable, it is also a bit vague and open to various interpretations, a fact to which we will return shortly.

Research has also shown that learning to read in English takes more than twice as long as learning to read in more transparent orthographies like that of Finnish, and that the kinds of strategies readers use may be different. In particular, English speakers need to rely on more sight words (for those that show irregular patterns of sound and symbol). Nevertheless, it has become clear that readers of English, and indeed all languages, use some phonological processing (i.e., decoding of the letter-sound correspondences). This is true even in languages with writing systems that are not alphabetic (i.e., based on representation of distinctive sounds). For example, Chinese writing is a logographic system, in which each symbol represents a unit of meaning. In Hebrew vowels are not written, so that certain consonant sequences can represent many words, differing only in the choice and placement of pronounced vowels, which context enables native speakers to identify. Such languages are deemed to be still deeper or more opaque than English, yet phonological knowledge of the language is used in reading them nonetheless.

Because the Orthographic Depth continuum has been widely referenced in terms of spelling consistency, however, a viewpoint seems to have emerged that Irish is easier (in some accounts a great deal easier) to read than English, due to its greater consistency of spelling. Some comments from teachers and language experts suggest this view:

*Irish is so much simpler than English, because a sound is a sound.*

*Ar shlí amháin...is dóigh liom go bhfuil cuid mhaith den Ghaeilge b'fhéidir níos simplí...  
[In a way, I think that much of Irish is maybe simpler...]*

*Deirtear go bhfuil litriú na Gaeilge i bhfad níos fusa ná litriú an Bhéarla. [Irish spelling is said to be much easier than English spelling.]*

This belief in the relative ease of Irish orthography may help to feed the tendency to neglect the explicit teaching of decoding and spelling in Irish, on the assumption that once English reading has been learned, Irish will follow without difficulty. For some, success does come without instruction, as perhaps it did for those who made the remarks cited. But these are fluent Irish speakers, people who have managed to achieve an internalised understanding of the systematicity of Irish; the response of many learners is often quite different:

*Is cuimhneach liom Meireacánach ag rá liom...go rinne sé iarracht Gaeilge a fhoghlaim agus d'éirigh sé as: 'It [spelling] makes no sense at all!' a dúirt sé liom. [I recall an American telling me...that he tried to learn Irish and gave up: 'It [spelling] makes no sense at all!' he told me.]*

*In English, I think they're [pupils in 4th-6<sup>th</sup> class] very good at sounding out a word. So they look at, they come to something and they can sound it out. In Irish, they find it much more difficult, they don't even try sometimes, because they're so used to words sounding very different to how they're spelt [in English] -- they haven't been taught.*

To see what lies behind the apparent contradictions here, we have analysed the Irish orthographic system in some detail. We have compared Irish and English in terms of the regularity of spellings in most frequent words (Hickey & Stenson, 2011), especially those found in children's literature. Our studies reveal that Irish spelling is indeed more regular than that of English, at least in the most frequent vocabulary from the corpus of children's literature mentioned in Chapter 1, which we compared to a similar English corpus. In the most frequent 100 words examined, Irish regularity reached 71%, in contrast with only 52% in the most common 100 words of the English corpus. An examination of a larger segment of the Irish corpus, taking into account some consistent patterns of change in pronunciation, shows a rise in Irish regularity to 85%. However, regularity is not the whole story by any means. Usha Goswami, a leading British reading expert, has argued that phonological complexity is an equally key factor in ease of literacy acquisition (Goswami 2005, among others).

A number of (often interconnected) aspects of spelling also play a role in determining orthographic depth (a measure of the complexity of a system). These include:

- the syllable structure in each language,
- the ratio of phonemes in the language to letters available to represent them,
- the use of complex (i.e., two-letter) graphemes and diacritics, and
- the phonological and morphological structure of the language.

Finally, as Ziegler and Goswami (2005) highlighted the 'grain size' of a language is important, that is, the analytic level(s) to which the orthography is sensitive. In some of these respects, Irish and English are similar, but in previous work we have identified several areas that differ in the two languages in ways ranging from the small to the dramatic; these differences may well be responsible for some of the difficulties faced by beginning readers. The most salient of these differences include the use of diacritics (like accent marks) and complex (i.e., multi-letter) graphemes, the resulting higher ratio of letters to phonemes, and certain aspects of Irish word-forms, in particular initial mutations.

Teachers report that the *síneadh fada* diacritic seems to be a problem for many learners, who do not understand its function, but some adult readers report no recollection of ever being taught how this diacritic systematically lengthens the vowel. As the *fada* is the only diacritic used in Irish, its function is easy enough to illustrate by systematic use of minimal pair exercises (contrasting words that differ only on the vowel, e.g. *briste –bríste*) such as those presented in Chapter 9. A far bigger source of difficulty in our view is the high percentage of complex graphemes of Irish, which means that Irish words tend, on average, to be longer than English ones even at early stages of reading, and the ratio of letters to phonemes is often quite high compared to that of English. For example, one Irish word of the most frequent 1000, *aghaidh*, is spelt with seven letters, but pronounced with only one or two phonemes, depending on the spoken dialect. But many less extreme examples can be found in common early vocabulary, as a result of the spelling conventions for marking initial mutations and consonant quality, among other things (e.g., pronunciation of words like *bainne*, *caoineadh*, *thosaigh*, or even *ise*, all in the 100 most frequent words from the corpus of children's books), may not be at all transparent to learners whose early literacy instruction has been based on English. These spelling patterns will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapters 5-7.

In regard to word forms, the changes in spelling due to the initial mutations of Irish mean that, unlike English, the initial sound (onset) of many words is variable, depending on the context in which it occurs, a situation that can overwhelm learners who may not recognize

that *bád*, *bhád*, and *mbád* are in fact the same word. In addition, Irish has a more complex verbal morphology than English, with dramatic changes in the forms of some of the most frequent verbs, depending on whether they appear in statements, or in questions, negatives, or subordinate clauses (*tá/níl/bhfuil*, or *feiceann/*, *chonaic/bhfaca*, etc.). Moreover, in some dialects at least, certain verbal endings, such as *-adh*, are spelt alike but pronounced differently, depending on the function they have (e.g., conditional *dhúnfadh*, verbal noun *dúnadh*, or past impersonal *dhúnadh*).

These features of the language contribute to orthographic opacity, and may take a very long time for learners to figure out inductively. Explicit presentation of the phonological system involved and the way sounds are reflected in spelling will help speed acquisition of some of these patterns (although irregular verbs will remain irregular). In short, there is reason to believe, given these and other complexities to be discussed in later chapters, that Irish spelling will be no less challenging than that of English, especially to children who are not yet fully fluent in Irish nor fully literate in English.

## Conclusions

The processing of written text in Irish is complicated by several factors. First, readers who have started learning to read already in their native language, in most cases English, may be affected by negative transfer (interference) from that language if the new rules are not explicitly pointed out. Because Irish spelling rules are quite alien to those of English, despite use of the same alphabetic symbols, readers (including perhaps even teachers of Irish) may be misled to spelling pronunciations that deviate dramatically from the actual pronunciations of words and may therefore hamper the learning of reading. Being provided with direct access to rules of Irish spelling can ease the process of developing the automaticity of word recognition that is essential to developing fluent reading skills. Finally, the use of complex graphemes in Irish for many more purposes than in English produces words that are on average much longer in their written form than most early English vocabulary. In addition, unexpected letter sequences like those resulting from initial mutations can bewilder beginning readers who do not yet fully have a grasp of the grammatical phenomena represented by the spelling conventions. Explicit instruction and practice manipulating such spellings can be extremely helpful as beginning readers grapple with the new system.

As noted above, a key element in coming to grips with the spelling system is the development of learners' linguistic awareness, particularly phonological awareness, that is, the ability to manipulate the sounds of spoken language, through work with rimes and onsets, syllable identification, and segmentation of words into individual sounds. This is well established as a factor that plays a significant role in reading success among children learning to read their native language, and has been shown to transfer from a first to a second language. However, the first language of reading instruction can affect learners' phonological awareness; that is, without a strong foundation in the phonological structure of the second language, the patterns of the L1 may be followed in reading the L2, with negative results. Thus, instruction that targets the sound patterns of Irish and emphasises their differences from those of English is a prerequisite for helping children grasp the critical features of Irish orthography. That is, they cannot understand how spelling reflects pronunciation if they do not understand the pronunciation in the first place. This is one reason why the curriculum guidelines advise providing instruction that compares Irish and English, and focuses pupils' attention on distinctions that are made in Irish but not in English (such as <o> vs. <ó>, etc.). This development of phonological awareness in Irish is a pre-reading development, one that

teachers can introduce in Infants classes as they work on children's oral skills, even before formal reading instruction begins.

## Chapter 3 Further Reading and Resources

1. Nassaji (2014) summarises the top-down vs. bottom-up debate and provides a good recent survey of what is known about lower level processing on reading (i.e., the skills surrounding decoding and word-access), and the relationship between reading in a first and second language. Harrison's (1998,1999) summaries follow through with more detailed discussion of classroom implications. The role of Phonological Awareness in SLA is reviewed in Haigh, Savage, Eros and Genesee (2011). Grabe (2009) Chapter 2 summarises how text is processed in fluent reading and Chapter 13 discusses research showing the pitfalls of guessing from context, and guidelines for direct instruction for vocabulary through reading. Chapter 16 gives further detail on the different components of a reading curriculum.
2. For further detail, the seminal studies by Adams (1990) and Chall (1967, with a second edition in 1983), arguing for the value and importance of phonics instruction, remain classics, still regularly cited. The other side of the debate was first proposed by Goodman in 1976 (see Goodman & Xu, 2003 and Goodman 1997 for discussion) and Gollash (1982).
3. Position statements on top-down vs.bottom-up needs have been published by NICHD(2000) EACEA/Eurydice (2011), and National Center for Family Literacy (2008). The official position statement of the International Literacy Association on the teaching of phonics can be found at: <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/phonics-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=6>
4. The 2006 study of Irish achievement is Harris, J., & Forde, P. Peter Archer, Siobhán Nic Fhearaile and Mark O’Gorman. 2006. *Irish in Primary Schools: Long-term National Trends in Achievement*. A pdf copy can be downloaded from <http://www.gael scoileanna.ie/assets/Irish-in-Primary-Schools.pdf>  
Inspectorate reports include DES (2008): <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/?pageNumber=4>  
and Hislop (2013), available at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/?pageNumber=1>
5. The scholarly literature presenting studies addressing the importance of decoding skills in reading development is vast; Stuart, Masterson and Dixon (1999), Stanovich and Stanovich (1999), and Ellis (1997) discuss the issues and cite other studies of relevance. Linnea Ehri has done much influential work on the stages of reading development and the role of decoding in that development; a few of her many publications are listed in the bibliography. Stanovich (1986) discusses the concept of Matthew Effect as part of a review of research on individual differences in reading.
6. Bernhardt and Kamil (1995), Bernhardt (2003), Verhoeven (2000, 2011) and Droop and Verhoeven (2003) discuss the differences between first and second language reading and some of the effects of bilingualism, including how limited skills may short-circuit the process and lead to inefficient strategies. Discussion of the reading difficulties of Irish pupils and their implications with respect to decoding ability or its lack can be

found in Hickey (1991, 2005, 2007) Stenson and Hickey (2016, 2011), and Parsons and Lyddy (2009a, b).

7. One of the classic works on transfer from L1 to L2 is Odlin (1989). His focus is largely on transfer in grammar and pronunciation and he treats reading only briefly. Ringbom (1987) argued for the existence of positive transfer in reading in a study of Finnish speakers learning English, which compared those who had prior knowledge of Swedish (closely related to English) with those who did not. A corollary of his work is that significant orthographic differences can have a negative effect on ease of acquisition. Durgunoglu (2002) provides a good review of research on L2 transfer; although her goals are to show how transfer can be used as a diagnostic for L2 reading difficulties, the review is still useful for L2 reading in general.
8. Seymour, Aro and Erskine (2003), compared children learning English with learners of 12 other European languages in one of the most comprehensive studies of orthographic depth and acquisition of reading. Their results have been replicated repeatedly and expanded to include other languages, among them Welsh (Spencer and Hanley 2003), Czech (Caravolas, Kessler, Hulme and Snowling 2005), Turkish (Durgunoglu 2006), Japanese and Albanian (Ellis et al., 2004), and Hungarian (Ziegler et al., 2010).
9. Other aspects of orthographic depth have been discussed by Seymour, (2007); Caravolas, Volín and Hulme (2005); Bear, Templeton, Helman and Baren (2004); Caravolas, Kessler, Hulme and Snowling (2005); Durgunoglu (2006); and Ziegler and Goswami, (2005, 2006).
10. Bear et al. (2004) discuss a number of issues relevant to the teaching of decoding. They argue that spelling can offer insights into literacy processes, and outline different levels of orthographic knowledge that propel reading development and must be considered in designing literacy instruction. They also discuss ways bilingualism can be affected by knowledge of more than one language and recommend comparison of the languages being learned.

# Chapter 4

## On good terms with terminology

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Before presenting the spelling analysis, it is important to clarify some basic assumptions and terminology. We try to avoid technical jargon as much as possible, but some terms and conventions are necessary for clarity, and they are introduced and explained in this chapter.

### Assumptions

First, when we talk here about the *vowels* and *consonants* of Irish we are usually talking about **sounds** rather than **spellings**, unless otherwise noted. Discussions of language by non-linguists often confuse sounds and spellings, especially when talking about Irish, where letters of the alphabet can be ambiguous in the ways they are pronounced, and where both sounds and spellings differ so much from those of English, despite using a similar alphabet.

Teachers, pupils and other readers not trained in linguistics may be further confused by the use of familiar letters of the alphabet to represent sounds in the phonological transcriptions that use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). To help to clarify our discussion of the sound system of Irish here note the following:

- symbols that represent sounds are bracketed with slashes (e.g. /ai/), according to the conventions of the IPA (which will be explained below).
- When we are talking specifically about spellings, angled brackets are used around the letter(s), as in <i>, <d>, <in>, etc.
- When we refer to (English or Irish) words in their written form, they will be in italic font; if we need to present the pronunciation of a word, the transcription will be bracketed just like single sounds.

### Defining some terms

Familiarity with a few linguistic terms will be helpful in following the descriptions presented here. In addition to the definitions given in Chapter 3 for *decoding*, *phonics* and *phonetics*, a few more are introduced and defined below.

#### *Phoneme*

A phoneme is a distinctive unit of sound. The symbols for phonemes are traditionally written between slashes to show we are talking about sounds rather than spellings. So, /s/, /i/, /t/, /i:/ are the sounds represented by the letters <c> <i> <t> <y> in the English word *city*.

Sounds are identified as phonemes in a language when they can be used to differentiate meanings. These are the building blocks of pronunciation in a language; they are what an alphabetic writing system is meant to represent. A phoneme may have slightly different pronunciations in different parts of a word, but these differences typically go unnoticed by speakers of the language, as they do not differentiate meanings. See the discussion of **phones** below.

Sounds that are associated with separate phonemes in one language may not be distinct in another, even though similar phones may exist in specific contexts. For example, the English sounds usually written as <l> and <r> represent different phonemes (also transcribed /l/ and /r/ phonemically), as can be seen by pairs of words like *light* and *right*, or *lie* and *rye* where the first sound is the only difference in pronunciation between the words (notice that the spellings do not have to match, but it is **sounds** that matter here). But in Thai and Japanese, although the same two sounds can be heard in both languages, each occurs only in certain predictable and mutually exclusive contexts, so the two sounds never distinguish meanings in these languages. They are merely different (contextually determined) versions of a single phoneme, and speakers of these languages do not hear them as different. As a result, Japanese and Thai learners of English often have trouble differentiating /l/ and /r/, leading to the famous ‘flied lice’ problem, a characteristic feature of accents from speakers of Asian languages which do not make a meaningful contrast between these sounds.

On the other hand, the English letter <l> represents a single phoneme, although it is pronounced slightly differently in different parts of words. Listen as you say the words *list* and *still*. Pay close attention to the pronunciation of the letter <l> in each word and to the position of your tongue. In both, your tongue touches the ridge just behind your teeth. But when you say *still*, you should feel some tongue action in the back of your mouth as well. The first sound, sometimes called ‘light <l>,’ is only found at the beginning of a syllable in English (e.g., *lean*, *last*, *listen*) and the second ‘dark <l>’ is used instead at the end of a syllable (e.g., *all*, *milk*, *soul*, *Galway*). Since the two pronunciations are totally predictable from the part of the word where the sound occurs, English speakers do not usually notice the difference, and consider both to be just /l/; that is, they are versions of one phoneme (and can be written identically).

But in Irish, both types of <l> are found at the beginnings **and** the ends of syllables. Compare the Irish words *léigh* and *lae*, or *fáil* and *fál*. In each pair, the first <l> is the variety known in Irish as slender (corresponding to the English light <l>) and the second (corresponding to English dark <l>) is called broad; this is the only difference in sound (ignore other aspects of spelling for the moment) between the two words in each pair. That is, the two sounds written with <l> are separate phonemes in Irish, but they are not in English. As a result, English-speaking learners of Irish often have trouble pronouncing (and, at first, perhaps even hearing) the broad <l> at the beginning of a word (as in *lae*) or the slender one at the end (as in *fáil*), where they never occur in English. Specific assistance in hearing and producing these distinctions, through presentation of pairs like these, can be helpful in building beginning readers’ awareness of the sound system of Irish as well as providing some initial insights into spelling and how it works.

### *Phone*

In linguistics, a phone is any speech sound, whether it is used to distinguish meanings (i.e., a distinct phoneme) or a variant pronunciation of a phoneme that depends on where it occurs in a word, like the light and dark versions of /l/ in English mentioned above. For example, in English the phoneme we write as <p> is pronounced with a puff of air (called *aspiration*) when it comes at the beginning of a syllable, as in *pie*, but without that puff when it follows an <s>, as in *spy*. Test this by holding up a hand or piece of paper before your mouth as you pronounce the two and see if you can feel the puff or see the paper move when saying *pie* but not *spy*.

Because these sounds are phonetically different, they are written differently in phonetic representations, using square brackets: [p<sup>h</sup>] and [p], and in English they are known as **allophones** of the phoneme /p/. In some languages, like Chinese and Korean, the difference between them can be the only meaningful difference between two words, and they are separate phonemes in those languages (which would be transcribed therefore with the phoneme slash brackets, as /p<sup>h</sup>/ and /p/). But in English, because which one you get is entirely predictable from the context in which it occurs (after /s/ or not), the difference between them is not usually noticed by English speakers, and they are considered to be variant forms of one phoneme, /p/. Similarly, the light and dark <l> in English are allophones of the phoneme /l/, but in Irish, where they are separate phonemes, we will transcribe them as /l'/ and /l/, following the usual Irish transcription conventions<sup>1</sup>. In this handbook, we will rarely need to refer to the more detailed phonetic differences marked with square brackets, so the transcriptions using /.../ will be more common than those with [...]. As such, we will be glossing over some of the phonetic detail that results from the contexts in which a sound appears in different words; these subtle differences are best learned by careful listening to native speakers as fluency progresses.

### *Grapheme*

Graphemes are units of writing. Like phonemes, these are also not used uniformly across languages. For example, the letter <j> represents the phoneme /dʒ/ in English, as in *judge*, *just*. But in French, where that sound does not even exist, <j> stands for the sound /ʒ/, like the <s> in English *treasure* or the <z> in *azure*. In Spanish it is the sound transcribed in IPA as /x/, the sound that is written <ch> in Irish and German (*loch*, *Bach*), and in German, Polish and Swedish, <j> stands for the sound we write as <y> in *yes*, *yellow*. In Malagasy, the language spoken in Madagascar, and in transliterations of some of the languages of India (which use a different alphabet altogether) <j> is used for a sound that we English speakers would hear as the sequence /dz/. No doubt the letter has other pronunciations in still other languages. In other words, we cannot assume that the pronunciation a particular letter or sequence of letters has in English will be the same in Irish or any other language. Spelling systems are not universal, and must be learned individually, even when the actual forms of the letters are the same.

In some languages, each grapheme represents one and only one phoneme and each phoneme is written with one and only one grapheme. Few languages actually achieve this level of exact correspondence, although some, like Finnish, Albanian, and Turkish, mentioned in Chapter 3 come close. In many languages, however, English and Irish among them, a single phoneme might be represented by different graphemes in different words (consider the last sound of each of these English words: *magic*, *back*, *sheik*, *sikh* – all pronounced /k/, but spelt differently. Likewise, the same grapheme may represent different sounds; consider the <c> in *cat* and *city*; phonemically these are /k/ and /s/, respectively. As we will see, Irish too has graphemes that can represent more than one sound and sounds that can be represented by

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<sup>1</sup> The transcriptions in IPA for broad and slender consonants are different, with more precise characterisations of the phonetic differences. However, for the sake of simplicity, we will use the standard Irish symbols.

more than one grapheme, but as we will discuss, they are used quite differently in Irish and English.

### *Digraph*

Graphemes may be complex, consisting of more than one letter to represent a single sound. These are known as digraphs. Examples from English include <sh>, <th> (which is actually used for two phonemes, the one in *this* and the one in *think*), <ck>, <ch> (as in *church* but also sometimes /k/, as in *tech*), and many double letters in words like *winning*, *little*, *ladder*, and so on. Vowel digraphs in English include <ea>, <oa>, <ei>, <ie>, <ee>, <oo> and a number of others. Many digraphs also feature in Irish spelling, as we shall see in later chapters. Sometimes a language may use **trigraphs** or even larger sequences, as in Irish <bhf>, used for an /f/ or /f/ after *urú*. In this handbook, we will use the term *digraph* for any complex grapheme, no matter how many letter symbols it contains.

### *Schwa*

‘Schwa’ is the name given to the indistinct vowel sound that is found in unstressed syllables in both English and Irish. It sounds rather like ‘uh’. It is the sound of the letter in bold in the following English words: *sofa*, *telephone*, *obsession*, and *accident*. It is also heard in unstressed syllables in Irish words, e.g., *páiste*, *eilifint*, and *amadán*. It is written in IPA as /ə/. Note, however, that it may be spelt with a variety of vowels.

### *Diphthong*

A diphthong is a complex phoneme, which begins as one vowel sound and ends as another, all within a single syllable. The transcription of a diphthong sound with a digraph reflects the complexity of the sounds. Irish has four diphthong phonemes, two with a fairly straightforward spelling, and two that are more complex. The simplest are /iə/, usually written <ia>, and /uə/, usually written <ua>. The other two, /ai/ and /au/, derive from earlier combinations of a vowel and consonant, and their spellings are correspondingly more complex: the spellings <adh>, <agh> often represent the sound /ai/ and <amh> or <abh> represent /au/. These will be described further in later chapters.

### *Syllable*

Syllables are units of speech usually built around vowels and their attendant consonants. As with all other concepts in phonology, however, the focus is on **sounds** rather than spellings, so just counting the number of vowels in a word can be misleading, especially in Irish, where, as will be detailed in later chapters, many vowels are not pronounced but serve as markers to identify consonants.

In addition, diphthongs, which function like single vowels phonologically, are written with two vowels or even sequences of vowels and consonants so that what may look like two syllables with a consonant symbol separating two vowels may actually be pronounced as one (e.g., *radharc*, *leabhar*). Moreover, as will be seen in later chapters (especially Chapter 7), not all pronounced vowels are in fact written. And, as usual, dialects of Irish may differ in their pronunciation of certain words. It is therefore essential to listen to how a word is pronounced

in determining how many syllables it has. In most cases, syllables are divided before a single consonant in the middle of a word (e.g., *bea-lach*) or between two consonants (e.g., *muin-tir*). Again, these are sounds, so digraphs like *ch*, *nn*, etc. are counted as single consonants (*cinneadh* but *cinn-te*). Irish syllables may consist of only a vowel (e.g., *é*), but may begin with up to three consonants and end with up to two (e.g., *splanac*).

## The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

The IPA provides a way to record pronunciations of any language in a uniform way, regardless of the orthography used to write the language, and even if it has no written tradition at all (most of the world's languages do not). This allows for more accurate comparison of sounds across languages. Because the IPA was created mainly by speakers of European languages, however, transcriptions of consonant sounds are often the same as the letters of the Roman alphabet used to spell them in both the Irish and English writing systems. There are only a few exceptions that have a transcription different from the spelling (or from their English pronunciations). These will be highlighted in bold in some of the tables below. Table 4.1 shows the symbols for consonants found in both Irish and English, with examples from each language.

**Table 4.1: Consonant graphemes and IPA transcriptions**

Grapheme	IPA transcription	Sample word
<b>	/b/	<i>boat</i> <i>bád</i>
<c>	/k/	<i>call</i> <i>ceist</i>
<d>	/d/	<i>dog</i> <i>dubh</i>
<f>	/f/	<i>fast</i> <i>fág</i>
<g>	/g/	<i>gun</i> <i>gúna</i>
<h>	/h/	<i>hat</i> <i>hata</i>
<l>	/l/	<i>like</i> <i>lá</i>
<m>	/m/	<i>my</i> <i>mála</i>
<n>	/n/	<i>now</i> <i>nó</i>
<p>	/p/	<i>pat</i> <i>póca</i>
<r>	/r/	<i>race</i> <i>rás</i>
<s>	/s/	<i>some</i> <i>solas</i>
<t>	/t/	<i>take</i> <i>tusa</i>

Because Irish has many more consonant phonemes than English, it has more complex graphemes to represent them all as well. Some of these result from the initial mutations, lenition (*séimhiú*) and eclipsis (*urú*). The sounds created by *urú* are identical to those of the consonant added in the spelling (e.g., <gc> is pronounced exactly like <g>), all of which are included on the table above, so they will not be presented again. However, *séimhiú* may create sounds not found in Table 4.1, so they are shown, with their IPA transcriptions, in Table 4.2.

The remaining consonant graphemes are those that consist of double consonants: <ll>, <nn>, <rr>. Their phonetic form can be quite different from dialect to dialect, but in many cases they are indistinguishable from their single counterparts except for the effect they may have on a preceding vowel. For simplicity, therefore, we will simply transcribe them here as /l/, /nn/, /rr/, when we need to differentiate the phonemes from those with single-letter spellings. Slender consonants, which will be discussed in the next chapter, are traditionally transcribed in Irish grammatical descriptions with a tick following the consonant symbol (e.g., /t'/). This convention will be followed here, although, as noted, the actual IPA symbols for them are rather different.

**Table 4.2: Lenited consonant graphemes and transcriptions**

Grapheme	Transcription	Sample	Sounds like
<bh>	/v/ or /w/ <sup>a</sup>	<i>bhád</i>	<mh>
<ch>	/x/	<i>chat</i>	--
<dh>	/ʝ/	<i>dhubh</i>	<gh>
<fh>	Silent- no symbol	<i>fhág</i>	--
<gh>	/ʝ/	<i>ghúna</i>	<dh>
<mh>	/v/ or /w/ <sup>a</sup>	<i>mhála</i>	<bh>
<ph>	/f/	<i>phóca</i>	<f>
<sh>	/h/	<i>sholas</i>	<h>
<th>	/h/	<i>thar</i>	<h>

<sup>a</sup>Pronunciation varies with the dialect.

Most vowels likewise are represented in IPA by the familiar symbols of the Roman alphabet. Because of the peculiarities of English spelling conventions, the pronunciations associated with IPA vowel symbols may seem odd to English speakers, but they are very close to the pronunciations of these same letters in the alphabets of many European languages, including Spanish, Italian, German, French, Latin, and indeed Irish. Table 4.3 provides the basic vowel symbols of the IPA that we will need here, along with the graphemes that typically represent them in the languages mentioned above (but not necessarily English).

**Table 4.3: Vowel graphemes and their IPA transcriptions**

Grapheme	Transcription	Example: Irish	Example: English (approximately equivalent)
<a>	/a/	<i>athair</i>	<i>father</i>
<e>	/e/	<i>te</i>	<i>bed</i>
<i>	/i/	<i>minic</i>	<i>fish</i>
<o>	/o/	<i>doras</i>	<i>butter</i>
<u>	/u/	<i>cupán</i>	<i>put, foot</i>

<á>	/a:/	<i>tá</i>	<i>call</i>
<é>	/e:/	<i>cé</i>	<i>mate</i>
<í>	/i:/	<i>díol</i>	<i>meet, meat</i>
<ó>	/o:/	<i>tóg</i>	<i>boat, dole, soul</i>
<ú>	/u:/	<i>súil</i>	<i>pool, chew, who</i>

When we want to make a general statement that applies to any consonant or vowel in the language, the capital letters C and V will be used as an abbreviation for ‘any consonant’ or ‘any vowel.’

In the following chapters, transcriptions will be mainly phonemic. Phonemically the dialects are fairly similar, with only minor phonetic differences. Based on Ó Raghallaigh’s analysis of Gaoth Dobhair, an Cheathrú Rua and Corca Dhuibhne, we can identify one vowel phoneme more in Ulster than in Connacht and Munster, and two additional consonant phonemes (slender /nn’/ and /ll’/) in Connacht and Ulster compared to Munster. The phonetic details of many vowels and consonants are different from one region to another, but these differences of detail will not be considered further here.

## Chapter 4 Further reading and resources

1. Adams (1990) gives a good overview on phonemes and graphemes in Chapter 12. The phonology chapters of any introductory textbook in linguistics will have the main symbols of the IPA (at least those used in transcribing English) and a discussion of phonetics and phonemic analysis and the differences between them.
2. A chart of all the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet, with recorded pronunciations of the sounds they represent, can be found at: <http://www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org/ipa-sounds/ipa-chart-with-sounds/>
3. Ó Raghallaigh (2013) provides a convenient phonemic analysis (with grapheme equivalents) for three different dialects of Irish, one each from Ulster, Connacht and Munster, including a more detailed phonetic description (including the IPA transcriptions) of broad and slender consonants. An associated website enables readers to hear pronunciations of particular transcriptions for each dialect at <http://www.fuaimanna.ie/>
4. For purposes of comparison, some readers may be interested in analyses of English spelling. Several of these are available, including Coulmas (2003), Cook (2004), Venezky (1970), and Crystal (2012).



# Chapter 5

## Sound to spelling: Consonants in Irish

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This chapter and the next provide brief overviews of the sound patterns of Irish consonants and vowels and the ways they are represented in spelling. A solid understanding of the sound system can be helpful to both teachers and learners for developing literacy in Irish. Accordingly, these chapters start with an overview of Irish sounds and proceed to the spellings that are used for them. In Chapter 7 the same ground will be covered starting from spellings and moving toward sounds, an approach that is likely to be more convenient for beginning readers learning to decode Irish, and which will serve as the basis for the exercises in Chapter 9.

### Consonants in Irish and English

Most individual consonants in Irish have similar values to their counterparts in English, with one major wrinkle, to be discussed below. But the primary articulation (where the tongue and lips go to produce the sound) is roughly the same in the two languages. That is, when you see the letter <b>, it will be made by pressing the lips together; the letter <s> will represent a hissing sound with tongue held against the ridge behind the teeth, and so on.

In some cases where a letter has more than one pronunciation in English, the corresponding Irish letter has only one. For instance, the letter <c> may be pronounced in English either like /k/ (as in *cat*) or like /s/ (as in *city*, which starts with the same sound as *sister*). In Irish, it is always the first of these pronunciations, subject to the wrinkle described below. Similarly, <g> is always 'hard' in Irish, as in English *give*, never as in *gene*. And the spelling <ch>, which is pronounced differently in each of the English words *church*, *school*, and *chef*, has a pronunciation in Irish that is not found in English at all (say /k/ while letting air continue to pass through your mouth), but which does not vary except in the way all Irish consonants do, as described below in the section on Consonant Quality.

### Initial mutations

One complication for Irish spelling is found in the consonant phonemes that result from the famous initial mutations. These are commonly found in a variety of well-known grammatical contexts, and are spelt with digraphs, which simultaneously convey the basic form of the word (the form that would be found in dictionaries) and the pronunciation change caused by the mutation. Some of the mutated forms do not occur outside of the mutation system (e.g. <gh>, <mh>), while others are identical in pronunciation to sounds that exist independently of the mutation system, where they are written with simple graphemes. Thus, some mutation spellings are pronounced exactly like single consonants (e.g., <mb> is pronounced exactly like <m>), whereas others have only the one spelling because the sounds exist only as mutation forms of some other consonant (e.g., <mh>, <dh>, etc.). Moreover, not every

consonant is affected by each mutation. The instability in word onsets that mutations produce in Irish can be a challenge for beginning readers. For this reason, the system, and the relationship between mutated and non-mutated consonants, deserves explicit attention.

**Lenition, or séimhiú** (sometimes inaccurately translated as *aspiration*), involves weakening of a pronunciation from its original, or base pronunciation, and is written by adding an <h> after the original consonant. This was an historical change, which began nearly 2000 years ago, and was originally the quite straightforward result of a consonant being weakened when it occurred between two vowels. Some of those vowels have since dropped out of the language, however, so that the changes are no longer entirely predictable from the phonological context alone. As a result, today we find lenited consonants in the middle and at the end of words (where they do not alternate with basic forms), as well as initially in the contexts created by what are now grammatically conditioned changes. The consonants affected by lenition are listed below, with their spellings and pronunciations, and single-letter equivalents, if any.

**Table 5.1: Lenition**

Unlenited consonant	Lenited spelling with examples	Examples	Pronunciation (IPA symbol)	Equivalent simple grapheme
<b>, <m>	<bh>, <mh>	<i>bhád, mhór</i>	/v/, /w/	<v> (borrowed words only)
<c>	<ch>	<i>chuaigh</i>	/x/	none
<d>, <g>	<dh>, <gh>	<i>dhún, ghúna</i>	/ʎ/	none
<p>	<ph>	<i>phóca</i>	/f/	<f>
<s>, <t>	<sh>, <th>	<i>sholas, thart</i>	/h/	<h>
<f>	<fh>	<i>fhág</i>	Silence	none

Because the difference between a lenited and unlenited consonant can be the only thing distinguishing meaning (e.g., *bris* ‘break (as a command)’ vs. *bhris* ‘broke’, or *cuma* ‘appearance’ vs. *cumha* ‘loneliness, homesickness’), the first five lenited consonants in the second column, which are not found outside of the mutation system, are considered additional phonemes. The remaining lenited consonants, written <ph>, <sh>, and <th> are identical to the phonemes written <f> and <h>, as shown in the rightmost column.

**Eclipsis (in Irish urú)**, also has ancient historical origins, but is mostly found at the beginnings of words in alternation with unmutated (and lenited) forms of the same words, depending on the grammatical context of the word in a sentence. The consonants affected by eclipsis, as shown in Table 5.2, are /b/, /c/, /d/, /f/, /g/, /p/, and /t/.

**Table 5.2: Eclipsis**

<b>Original consonant spelling</b>	<b>Eclipsed spelling and examples</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Equivalent simple grapheme</b>
<b>	<mb>: <i>mbád</i>	/m/	<m>
<c>	<gc>: <i>gcat</i>	/g/	<g>
<d>	<nd>: <i>ndoras</i>	/n/	<n>
<f>	<bhf>: <i>bhfuil</i>	/w/, /v/	none
<g>	<ng>: <i>ngeata</i>	/ŋ/ (as in Eng <i>ring</i> )	none
<p>	<bp>: <i>bpota</i>	/b/	<b>
<t>	<dt>: <i>dteach</i>	/d/	<d>

It may be helpful to point out that in each sequence, the first grapheme (including <bh>) gives the pronunciation, and the second provides the dictionary, or uneclipsed form.

## Consonant Quality: Slender and Broad

The main fact about Irish consonants which has implications for spelling and reading (word identification in both spoken and written language) is that Irish has at least twice as many distinct consonant sounds as English, but the same number of letters to represent them (or even fewer, since Irish does not use <j>, <k>, <q>, <v> <w>, <x>, <y> or <z>, except occasionally in words borrowed from English).

Except for the sounds written as <th>, <ch>, <z>, and <j> in English, which do not exist in (most dialects of) Irish, nearly every consonant sound found in English has two Irish counterparts, both a broad and a slender version of each English consonant, but the same consonant letter is used to represent them both. (This also applies to the consonants resulting from mutations in the preceding section, although only the broad transcriptions were given in the tables).

Slender and broad consonants are separate phonemes in Irish, and the difference in pronunciation can be the only thing distinguishing two words, as in *bí* (slender <b>) vs. *buí* (broad <b>). They can also signal differences in grammar (e.g., *bád*, *báid*). In general, and very roughly speaking, slender sounds involve moving the body of the tongue closer to the roof of the mouth, and tend to be produced with spread lips and tenser mouth muscles than the broad consonants, which move the tongue further back or forward (depending on where the tongue makes its primary contact) in the mouth and often involve rounding the lips a bit, especially where /b/, /p/, /m/ and /f/ are concerned.

Because the alphabet used by Irish does not have enough consonant letters to represent all these consonant sounds with distinct symbols, each consonant letter generally stands for two sounds. Whether it is a broad or slender consonant is indicated by the vowel next to it, which must always match visually in quality (broad or slender), *whether or not* the pronounced vowel matches.

This spelling convention is the source of the well-known rule *caol le caol, leathan le leathan*, ‘slender with slender, broad with broad.’ A slender consonant is always surrounded by slender vowels (by definition the letters <e> or <i>) and a broad consonant is always surrounded by broad vowels (by definition <a>, <o>, or <u>). When the quality of the vowel that is pronounced and the consonants surrounding it match, the spelling is straightforward; what you see is what you get: *tirim*, *solas*, etc. In these words, the written vowels are the ones actually heard in speech, and the consonants just happen to be slender in *tirim* and broad in *solas*. So the pronounced vowels signal that information as well.

The problem is that sometimes the pronounced vowel written with a broad vowel letter (<a>, <o>, or <u>) is next to a slender consonant (or vice versa), and in those cases extra vowels appear *in spelling only* to identify the different quality of the consonant as in the example *buí* above. The trick is in knowing which vowels in a written word are actually pronounced and which are just marking consonants. The vowel to mark consonant quality is not the same in every case, but some patterns can be detected that make it easier to predict the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word. This section is mostly about sorting out how that works. The lists below provide a number of examples of words with every possible combination of broad and slender consonant and vowel pronunciations. From these it will be possible to work out the patterns of spelling that identify the consonant quality in different words.

## ‘Caol le Caol, Leathan le Leathan’ in spelling

### *Slender Consonants*

Table 5.3 gives examples of each slender consonant at the beginning, middle and end of words with slender vowels (/i/, /i:/, /e/, or /e:/) on either side. In Tables 5.4 and 5.5 are slender consonants that are next to broad vowels. As can be seen, the spellings are quite different in the two groups. Similarly, Tables 5.6 to 5.8 show broad consonants in combination with vowels of matching and non-matching qualities. In all the tables below, when we have occasion to refer to any consonant, C will be used (C' to specify any slender consonant) and V will be used for any vowel. It is worth noting that at the beginning of a word, broad and slender <r> are often not differentiated, and even those examples of <r> that are spelt as slender, like here, may be pronounced as broad /r/ (as described earlier). Elsewhere, slender /r'/ is pronounced with the tongue farther back in the mouth and is distinct from broad /r/.)

**Table 5.3: Slender consonant next to slender vowel sounds**

/p'/	péire, pinn, piliúr, cipín, teip
/b'/	béal, beilt, beir, bí, bith, binn, ribe, díbirt, cibé
/f'/	féin, fírinne, féidir, feirm, fill, difear, rífíneach
/m'/	mé, meirge, meisce, mise, mic, mian, ime, cimilt, tirim, im
/t'/	te, téim, tí, tír, tine, tiarna, ite, eitinn
/d'/	deis, dé, deir, di, dil, díol, díreach, dia, Íde, eide
/s'/	seic, sé, séid, sí, sílim, sin, siar, mise, leis, fíis
/n'/	neirbhís, ní, Niamh, tine, lín, in
/nn'/	éinne, sinne, binneas, tinn
/k'/	céim, cé, ceist, cill, cistin, ciall, Micí, mic
/g'/	gé, geimhreadh, geis, géar, ginearálta, gile, giall, Gaeilge, cigire, lig
/l'/	le, leis, léamh, libh, lig, liath, file, céilí, eile, mil
/r'/	reilig, réir, rí, rinne, tirim, tíre, uimhir, díbir
/v'/	bheith, bhí, mhic, uibhe, sléibhe, deimhin, libh, nimh
/x'/	chéad, chill, fiche, deich
/y'/	ghrian, ghé, Dhia, dhíol, dhéag

### *Patterns Observed*

C'e, C'é, C'ei, C'éi, C'ea, C'éa, C'i, C'í, C'ic', C'íc', C'eiC', C'éiC', C'ia (C'=slender Consonant)

<e>, <é> is written alone only at the end of a word

<ei>, <éi>, <i>, <í> are found between slender consonants.

<ia> follows a slender consonant at end of word or before broad C.

Only <i> appears *before* a slender consonant.

**Table 5.4: Slender consonant before a broad vowel sound**

/p'/	peann, piúratánach, peaca
/b'/	beo, beann, bean, biúró
/f'/	feá, fear, feoil, fiú, fliuch
/m'/	meán, meon, miúil, feirmeoir
/t'/	teocht, tiubh,
/d'/	deoch, dealbh, deoir, diúltú, caighdeán
/s'/	ciseán, Seán, sioc, siúl, seoladh, siopa
/n'/	neamh, neart, neodrach, níúmóine, neart
/nn'/	ainneoin, tinneas, fuinneog
/k'/	ciúin, ceol, ceann
/g'/	geab, geall, geonaíl, giúdach, giúistís, gearr
/l'/	leáigh, leo, liom, liúntas, bileog, leor
/ll'/	billiún, muilleoir
/r'/	reoite
/v'/	bheo, mheall
/x'/	cheann, cheo, chiúin
/y'/	gheall, dheoch, gheobhaidh

### *Patterns Observed*

C'ea, C'eá, C'eo, C'io, C'iu, C'iú

<i> separates a slender C' from a following <u>, <ú>

<e> separates C' from other vowels.

Exceptions: Cio (liom, siopa, sioc)

**Table 5.5: Slender consonant after a broad vowel sounds**

/p'/	caipín, aipindic, naipcín, páipéar, cóip,
/b'/	lúib, láib, aibí
/f'/	caife, próifíl
/m'/	aimsir, nóiméad
/t'/	áit, caite, dóite, brúite
/d'/	báid, láidir, maide, móide
/s'/	cáis, cláirseach, dúiseacht, náisiún
/n'/	Sheáin, bain, ciúin, úinéir, móin
/nn'/	Áine, ainneoin, dúinn
/k'/	cailc, constaic
/g'/	aighe, óige, Nollaig
/l'/	fáil, Cóil, cailín, cailc, baile, dáil, suimiúil
/ll'/	caill, áill, cailleach, fóill, guaillí
/r'/	cóir, airgead, airigh, cairde, dúirt, gáire
/v'/	dóibh, láimhe
/x'/	dóichí
/y'/	iarraidh, amuigh, dóigh, chuaigh, saighdiúirí, thosaigh, rachaidh

***Patterns Observed***

aiC', áiC', óiC', úiC'

i.e., place &lt;i&gt; before all slender C' after a broad vowel

## Spelling rules for slender consonants

The patterns observed in the tables above can be summarised with the spelling rules for slender consonants provided in the box below.

### RULES 1

#### Spelling rules for slender consonants

1. After a slender C' and before a broad V, insert silent <i> before <u>.
2. Before all other vowels, insert silent <e>.
3. *Liom* and *síoc* are exceptions to the two rules above, but though spelled with <o>, they are regularly pronounced as if /u/ in Connacht and Munster, so the insertion can be viewed as following pronunciation rather than the spelling of the vowel that is heard in these dialects.
4. After a broad V and before a slender C', insert silent <i>.

## Broad Consonants

Broad consonants can appear next to the letters <a>, <o>, and <u> or their long counterparts (with *fadas*) without any extra spelling aids.

**Table 5.6: Broad consonant next to broad vowel sounds**

/p/	pá, pota, poll, paca, pobal, punt, púdar, cupán, capall, cúpla
/b/	babóg, bád, baol, bó, buachaill, bun, tábla, gob
/f/	fatai, fanacht, fág, fón, focal, fúm, fuar, buaf, tafann
/m/	má, mac, marbh, ama, cam, mór, molta, muc, much, tamall
/t/	tá, tagann, tamall, tanaí, Tomás, tobar, tóg, tusa, tús
/d/	dath, dána, dó, doras, dúil, fód, ord, bád, fada
/s/	sos, salach, subh, tús, suas, lasadh
/n/	nó, nach, nua, náisiúin, lón, cupán, anam, fanacht
/nn/	ceann, ceannacht, banna, fonn
/l/	lón, luath, lá, mála, culaith, dul
/ll/	balla, mall, poll
/r/	rua, rós, rástaí, rann, rug, barr, cur, nár, óru
/k/	cá, cat, culaith, Colm, muc, olc, acu
/g/	gá, gasúr, gob, gur, grá, óg, tagann
/v/	mhór, mháthair, bhó, abhaile, amháin, lámh, ubh
/x/	chúig, chuala, chonaic, lucht, bocht, dócha, cloch
/y/	dhá, ghual, ghabh

### *Patterns Observed*

*CaC, CáC, CoC, CóC, CuC, CúC, CuaC*

<a, á, o, ó, u, ú, u> all stand alone on either side of broad consonants.

**Table 5.7. Broad consonant before a slender vowel sound**

/p/	puinn, siopaí
/b/	buí, baol, baoth, buile, buidéal, buíochas
/f/	faoi, faí, foinse, fuil, fuilleach, fuíoll, fuinneog
/m/	maíomh, maol, Muire, muicfheoil, muice, muintir, muid, muin
/t/	tuí, taoiseach, te, toinn, tuigeann, tuile, tuilleadh, tuismitheoir, potaí
/d/	daoine, gadaí, duibhe, duilliúr, duit, rudaí
/s/	suí, saor, saol, sairse, saothar, saíocht, suim, cleasaí
/n/	naíonán, naíonra, naoi, naomh, nuige
/nn/	ceannaí
/l/	laí, málaí, ballaí, lao, laoch, laethanta, laethúil, luí, luisne
/ll/	ballaí
/r/	ruibheanta, raon, saoraithe, carraeir
/rr/	earraí, Ciarraí
/k/	cácaí, caoi, caol, cuí, cuileog, cuimhin, cuid, cuireadh, cuisneoir
/g/	gaol, Gaeltacht, Gaeilge, fuinneogaí, gloine, goid, guí, eagraíocht
/v/	bhuí, bhuíochas, Mhuire, mhaol
/x/	chaoi, 'chuile, chuir, chroí, chuí
/y/	ghuí, Ghaeilge, ghoid, dhaoibh, dhuine

### *Patterns Observed*

**Cuí, Cui, Cao(i), Cae(i)**

**Rarer Caí (esp. in plurals), Coi, Coí**

**Before sounds /i/, /i:/ or /e:/ after a broad C, add <u> (normally), <a> or <o>**

**Between broad Cs, <ao> and <ae> replace <í>, <é>.**

**Table 5.8: Broad consonant after a slender vowel sound**

/p/	seáp, sliop
/b/	síob, piobar, íobairt, beagán
/f/	gaofar, iontaofa, naofa
/m/	taom (<ao> pronounced like <í> or <é>)
/t/	díot, créatúr
/d/	síoda, seaicéad, éad
/s/	thíos, béas
/n/	buíon, iníon, líon, mion-, léan
/nn/	mionna, daonna, mionn
/l/	aol, saol, caol, díol, míol, síol, réalt
/ll/	fuíoll
/r/	cíor
/k/	péacóg, pléasc
/g/	bréag
/v/	díobh, scríobh
/x/	féach, buíoch
/y/	bheadh, bhíodh

### *Patterns Observed*

íoC, ioC, eaC, éaC, aoC

Before a broad C, insert <a> after <é>, <e>,

but <o> after other vowels. <ao> is used between two broad consonants.

## Spelling rules for broad consonants

The box below summarises the broad consonant spellings that can be deduced from the above tables of examples.

### RULES 2

#### Spelling rules for broad consonants

1. Broad consonants followed by <í> have the letter <u>, or more rarely <a>, in spelling to separate the C from the pronounced V. (The <a> is used most often at the ends of words, before a suffix /i:/, written <-í>).
2. Broad consonants following an <í> usually have an <o> inserted between the V and C.
3. <ae> is used instead of <é> for /e:/ after a broad consonant.
4. <éa> is used instead of <é> after a slender but before a broad consonant.
5. <ao> is used instead of <í>(in Connacht and Ulster) or instead of <é> (in Munster) between two broad consonants. For historical reasons, <aoi> may be found at the end of a word as well as before a slender consonant.
6. <ui> (and occasionally <oi>) replaces short <i> after a broad and before a slender consonant.

## Consonant clusters

When two consonants come together, with few exceptions, both are either slender or broad, as indicated by the surrounding vowels.

### Examples

**Slender:**

**pléasc, briste, scéal, aicsean, bricfeasta, aigne, cairde, paimfléad, pinsean, saoirse, cailc, éisc, ainm, bricfeasta**

**Broad:**

**proifisiúnta, glanadh, glanta, seachnóidh, pléasc, gorm**

Exceptions are rare and include *ospidéal*, *giorria*, adverbs like *anseo*, *ansin*, and various compounds, like *seanbhean*, *fiorscéal*, *dodhéanta*, *sobhriste*, etc.

## Minimal Pairs

The difference between broad and slender is as critical in Irish as the difference between, say, /p/ and /b/ in English, or /m/ and /n/. It can be the only difference between two meanings, as in the following examples:

**Table 5.9 Minimal Pairs**

<b>Broad:</b>	<b>Slender:</b>
<i>búi</i> * ‘yellow,’	<i>bí</i> ‘be,’
<i>tacht</i> ‘choke’,	<i>teacht</i> ‘coming,
<i>fuar</i> ‘cold,’	<i>fuair</i> ‘got,’
<i>mún</i> ‘pee’	<i>múin</i> ‘teach’

Words can be heard sounded out (in the different dialects) at: [www.abair.ie](http://www.abair.ie)

Or at <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fuaim>

In the next pairs in Table 5.10, both the first and last consonant differ between broad and slender. The vowels are the same in each pair. The slender spellings are bolded in each word, illustrating the rules provided above.

**Table 5.10 Vowel pairs**

		Pronounced vowel
<i>siúl</i> ‘walk’	<i>súil</i> ‘eye’	ú
<b><i>diúl</i></b> ‘suck’	<b><i>dúil</i></b> ‘desire’	ú
<i>teas</i> ‘heat’	<i>tais</i> ‘damp’	a
<i>leabhar</i> ‘book’	<i>labhair</i> ‘speak’	a
<i>bean</i> ‘woman’	<i>bain</i> ‘dig’ (Connacht)	a
<i>ceol</i> ‘music’	<i>Cóil</i> ‘man.’s name’	ó

Drawing from the descriptions above, Table 5.11 overleaf presents the graphemes that can be identified for each consonant phoneme. Examples of graphemes which are in the most frequent 250 words in the corpus of children’s literature are in bold in Table 5.11, indicating which sequences are most likely to appear early in a child’s reading experience. The list may not be exhaustive, as variant regional pronunciations and additional mutation forms (only the most common are given on the table) may generate still other spellings associated with a particular pronunciation.

## Concluding Remarks

While the foregoing analysis explains why so many silent vowels are inserted into the spelling of Irish words, the problem, as Table 5.11 vividly illustrates, is that it produces a rather large and overwhelming set of graphemes for each phoneme. It is not a plausible starting point for teaching spelling, especially for learners whose pronunciation skills are still not fully developed. A more efficient way of learning and teaching spelling will be introduced in Chapter 7, after a look in the next chapter at the sounds of Irish vowels and their spellings.

## Resources

1. An tÁisaonad offers a range of materials free <http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/> *Túsphuaimneanna* is a set of downloadable booklets to teach sounds.
2. Phonics materials such as *Fónaic na Gaeilge* (BELB/Áisaonad) offer materials for presenting these sounds to beginner readers. Can be downloaded free [http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic\\_na\\_Gaeilge.html](http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic_na_Gaeilge.html) Also *Cód na Gaeilge, Ag Fiosrú Focal* (CCEA) a newer set of phonics resources for Irish available from <http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/codnagaeilge> See other resources listed on pages 119-120

Table 5.11 Examples of consonant graphemes

	Examples
/p/ <p, pa, pu, op, ap>	<b>p</b> oll, siopa <b>í</b> , <b>pu</b> inn, pí <b>o</b> pa, seá <b>p</b>
/p'/ <p, pe, pi, ip>	<b>p</b> ingin, <b>pe</b> aca, <b>pi</b> úratánach, có <b>p</b>
/b/ <b, bu, ba, ob, bp>	<b>b</b> án, <b>le</b> aba, <b>bu</b> í, rugba <b>í</b> , síob, b <b>p</b> oll
/b'/ <b, be, bi, ib, bp>	<b>b</b> ia, <b>be</b> o, <b>bi</b> úró, a <b>ib</b> í, <b>bp</b> íopa
/m/ <m, ma, mu, mb>	<b>m</b> ór, <b>ma</b> ma <b>í</b> , muid, mbá <b>d</b>
/m'/ <m, me, mi, im, mb, mbe>	<b>m</b> ise, <b>mé</b> , meon, miú <b>il</b> , <b>lé</b> im, mbia, mbeid <b>h</b> , mbeo
/f/ <f, fa, fu>	fanacht, faoin, fa <b>í</b> , fuil
/f'/ <f, fe, fi>	féin, fear, fiú
/v/ <bh, bhu, bha, obh, mh, mhu, mha, omh, bhf, bhfu>	<b>bhosca</b> , <b>ubh</b> , bh <b>u</b> í, scr <b>íob</b> ha <b>í</b> , <b>mhór</b> , mhuintir, mha <b>íomh</b> , <b>bhfaca</b> , <b>bhfuil</b>
/v'/ <bh, bhe, bhi, ibh, mh, mhe, mhi, imh>	<b>bh</b> í, bheo, bhiú <b>ró</b> , agaib <b>h</b> , mh <b>í</b> , mheon, mhiú <b>il</b> , Róim <b>h</b>
/t/ <t, tu, ta, ot>	<b>atá</b> , <b>tú</b> , <b>cat</b> , tu <b>í</b> , pláta <b>í</b> , díot
/t'/ <t, te, ti, it>	tíre, thit, teach, tiub <b>h</b> , áit
/d/ <d, du, da, od, dt>	do, cad, siad, duit, éada <b>í</b> , síod, dtug
/d'/ <d, de, di, id, ide, dt>	deir, dearg, diú <b>ltach</b> , féid <b>ir</b> , daideo, dtí
/n/ <n, no, na, on, nd>	<b>nach</b> , <b>aon</b> , <b>anois</b> , na <b>íonra</b> , in <b>íon</b> , ndún
/n'/ <n, ne, ni, in, nd>	<b>sin</b> , nead, niú <b>móine</b> , <b>tháin</b> ig, ndiaid <b>h</b>
/nn/ <n, nn, onn>	ann, ná ceannaigh, bíonn
nn'/ <n, nn, nni>	ní, níl, (Connacht), rinne, inniu
/s/ <s, su, sa, os>	sásta, suas, su <b>í</b> , rása <b>í</b> , síos
/s'/ <s, se, si, is>	sise, sé, seo, isteach, siopa, leis
/l/ <l, lu, la, ol, >	<b>dul</b> , luigh, eola <b>í</b> , síol
/l'/ <l, li, le, il >	leis, liom, leaba, fáil
/ll/ <l, ll, oll>	<b>lá</b> , balla, mall, giolla
/ll'/ <l, le ll, ill, ille>	léim, <b>leabhar</b> , fill, fóill, cailleach
/r/ <r, ro, or, ar>	<b>orm</b> , <b>fear</b> , dearg, roim <b>h</b> , fíor, féar
/r'/ <r, re, ir>	trí, breá, nuair
/k/ <c, cu, ca, oc>	<b>cá</b> , <b>cad</b> , ocras, cuir, peaca <b>í</b> , íoc
/k'/ <c, ci, ce, ic, ice>	cé, sciob, ceo, chonaic, craiceann
/g/ <g, gu, ga, ag, og>	agus, go, thug, gu <b>í</b> , tógaim, beag, díograis
/g'/ <g, ge, gi, ig>	gé, gile, <b>tháin</b> ig, gearr, Giúdach, gruaig
/x/ <ch, chu, cha, ach>	nach, chonaic, chuir, fiacha <b>í</b> , féach,
/x'/ <ch, che, chi>	<b>chéad</b> , chill, cheo, chiúin
/y/ <gh, ghu, dh, dhu, odh, adh>	ghabh, ghu <b>í</b> , dhul, dhuine, bíod <b>h</b> , bhead <b>h</b>
/y'/ <gh, ghe, ghi, igh, dh, dhe, dhi, idh>	ghé, gheall, ghiú <b>istís</b> , <b>amuigh</b> , dhíol, dheoch, dhiú <b>il</b> , réid <b>h</b>
/h/ <th, sh, h>	tháin <b>ig</b> , thug, thosaigh, shúil, <b>hata</b>
/h'/ <she, shi, thi, ith>	Sheán, shiú <b>il</b> , thio <b>cfaidh</b> , <b>maith</b>

\*Words in Bold are in the most frequent 250 of corpus



## Chapter 6

# Sound to spelling: Vowels in Irish

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Compared to consonants, the vowel phonemes of Irish are fairly straightforward, although details of pronunciation differ a good deal from region to region (as do those of English, of course). On the other hand, because some of the vowel letters are actually signalling information about consonants rather than marking a pronounced vowel, reading from print to pronunciation can be challenging. We will start here with the vowel **sounds**, as phonics-based materials do, and move to the more complex interactions of sound and spelling later.

Many linguistic studies have been published describing specific dialects in the Gaeltacht regions, and they vary somewhat in the number of distinctive vowel sounds, or phonemes, they propose. Some propose more distinct phonemes than there are letters to represent them, leaving certain vowel spellings ambiguous. Ó Siadhail's cross-dialect study goes the other direction, reducing the number of short vowel phonemes to only three, and relying on a complex and abstract system of rules to predict specific pronunciations according to the consonants that occur next to the vowels. While this may make sense from a technical point of view, it is not particularly helpful in the classroom, especially for second-language speakers outside the Gaeltacht regions.

We therefore start from the assumption that each vowel letter represents a distinctive phoneme. This assumption reflects the facts of several dialects, including those described in Risteard Breatnach's analysis of Ring Irish, Ó Raghallaigh's of An Cheathrú Rua and Corca Dhuibne, Ó Cuív's of West Muskerry in Cork, and de Búrca's of Tourmakeady in Mayo; the pronunciations that result from such an analysis will thus be easily recognizable to most Irish speakers. As learners' knowledge of Irish increases, especially if they can regularly encounter a specific dialect through acquaintances or repeated visits to a Gaeltacht, they can refine the details of their pronunciations to fit more closely with that of the dialect they have chosen. Most dialect studies also recognize as a separate phoneme the reduced vowel, *schwa*, in unstressed syllables. Much as in English, this reduced vowel may vary slightly, depending on the adjacent sounds, but we will simply transcribe all such forms with the IPA symbol, /ə/ (schwa), to signal that however a vowel may be spelled, it is not articulated as strongly and distinctively as when it bears the stress in a word.

### Vowel length

Short and long vowels, the latter most often marked with a (*síneadh*) *fada*, are distinct phonemes in Irish, as in English, but the relationship of long to short vowels is rather more direct in Irish. Long and short <i>/<i>, for example, are pronounced very similarly, unlike English, where the pronunciations of long and short <i> are quite different. In shifting from short to long vowels in English, you can feel your tongue move to a different position (compare *mat* and *mate*); in Irish there is very little change. In most Irish dialects, any accented vowel letter with a *fada* is pronounced long<sup>2</sup>; without the *fada* vowels are usually

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<sup>2</sup> In Ulster dialects, unstressed vowels with a *fada* may be pronounced as short.

short (but some patterned exceptions will be described later). The pronunciation difference in Irish is just what the terms *long* and *short* suggest: the long vowels take more time to say. They are also pronounced with somewhat tenser mouth muscles. There are many examples where vowel length is the only difference between two words with different meanings. **Pairs of words with only one sound differentiating them are called minimal pairs**, and can be very useful for illustrating important differences that learners must master for accurate speech. Some examples of minimal pairs for long and short vowels are: *briste* vs. *bríste*, *ciste* vs. *císte*, *te* vs. *té*, *fear* vs. *féar*, *ban* vs. *bán*, *solas* vs. *sólás*. The exercises in Chapter 9 contain more.

## Vowel phonemes and graphemes

Vowel spellings are quite simple when a vowel is of the same quality as any adjacent consonants. In that case, they are spelled just with the single letter (long or short) for that vowel, which is also the IPA symbol for the phoneme. The only exception is that the letters <e> and <é> occur alone only at the end of a word. Whenever a (slender) consonant follows the sounds /e/ or /e:/ they are spelt <ei>, <éi>. (For spellings of /e/, /e:/ next to broad consonants, see below.)

**Table 6.1: Broad vowels and consonants**

Sound	Spelling	Examples
/a/	<a>	cad, fanacht, cara, fada, blas, amach
/a:/	<á>	bád, cá, ná, tá, sásta, trá, mála, fáth
/o/	<o>	doras, gol, loch, orm, bocht, ocras
/o:/	<ó>	dó, fós, thóg, mór, dócha, glór
/u/	<u>	dul, cur, thug, rud, dubh, turas
/u:/	<ú>	úd, cúramach, cúl, tús, úll, dún
/ə/	<a>, <o> or <u> when unstressed:	cóta, do, agus

**Table 6.2: Slender vowels and consonants**

Sound	Spelling	Examples
/i/	<i>	imigh, tirim, thit, sise, brisim, imirt
/i:/	<í>	sí, bím, sílim, tír, fírinne, rí, míle
/e/	<e>, <ei>	freisin, beirt, te, le, leis, ceist, eile, deirim
/e:/	<é>, <éi>	mé, cé, é, éist, féin, chéile, Éire
/ə/	<e> or <i>	when unstressed: <i>páiste, inti</i>

In words where vowels combine with consonants of *different* quality, things get more complicated. We already saw in the preceding chapter how vowels can combine with consonants to mark quality. When the pronounced vowels appear next to consonants of different quality, the effect on spelling is **sequences of vowels, only one of which generally identifies the pronunciation, and the rest signal consonant quality**. In addition, long vowels normally written with a letter that differs in quality from the surrounding consonants

may be written with distinct digraph sequences. These digraphs have come to be equivalent in pronunciation to single vowels+*fada* spellings, when it is necessary to show a mismatch in vowel and consonant quality. These are described next.

### *Digraphs*

Three digraphs routinely replace the Vowel+*fada* to signal long vowels in specific contexts. When long /o:/ follows a slender consonant, it is usually spelt <eo>. Notice that there is no *fada* on the <o> here but it is pronounced long nevertheless in most words with this spelling (*ceol, beo, seoladh, múinteoir*). However, there are a few common exceptions such as *seo, deoch, eochair*, where the pronunciation of <eo> is a short /o/).

When the slender vowels /e:/ and /i:/ appear between broad consonants, or before or after a broad consonant at the edge of a word, they can be written with digraphs that also mark the broad consonants. The sequence <ae> represents /e:/ in these contexts, in place of the more common <é> or <éi>, which only occur between two slender consonants: *laethanta, tae, captaen, Gael, aer* are examples. For /i:/ between broad consonants, where slender <i> will not do, <ao> is used in Connacht and Ulster: *saol, daor, aon, lao*. In Munster /i:/ is not heard much between broad consonants, and <ao> is pronounced as /e:/, just like <é> or <ae>. Both these digraphs may also be found following a broad consonant (or initially) but preceding a slender one, in which case an <i> is added to obey the rule of *caol le caol*: *Aoine, caoire, traein*, are examples. With the exception of *lao*, an <i> is also added to <ao> at the end of a word: *naoi, faoi, caoi*, etc; these vowels are pronounced like <ao>. Before a slender consonant <aoi> sounds like <i> even in Munster.

Other sequences of vowels generally represent short vowel sounds, and one or more of the letters in a sequence marks a consonant of different quality from the vowel, according to the patterns outlined next.

### *Slender vowels, broad consonants*

When a slender vowel follows a broad consonant, a broad vowel, usually <u> or <a>, but occasionally <o>, must be added to separate the two; this vowel identifies the consonant before it as being broad. In all the examples below, the sound heard is the one written in bold, and the extra vowels indicate the quality of the preceding consonant. Before short /i/ the letters <u> and <o> are used. Before a long /i:/ (= <i>), the letters <a>, <o> or <u> all may be found marking a broad consonant; <oi>, is less common than the other possibilities, but not unheard of, as shown below

/i/	<b>cuid, muid, duilleog, fuil,</b> roimh, anois, choinneáil, goid
/i:/	<b>buí, suí, luí,</b> scéalaí, rúnaí, claí (in Munster) croí

The short vowel /e/ is rare in the vicinity of broad consonants, but is found in some dialects (e.g., Connacht and sometimes Munster) after a broad consonant and before a slender one, where it is usually written <oi>: e.g., *soicind, oifig, thoil, troid, an oiread*. In other dialects, an /i/ or /o/ may be heard in some of these words.

Similarly, one of these vowels followed by a broad consonant needs to be separated from the consonant by a broad vowel in spelling. This vowel is usually <o> after long or short <i>, <i> and <a> after <e>, <é>.

/i/	fios, iontu, prionsa, cion (pronunciation varies with dialect)
/i:/	díol, síol
/e/	beag, beagán, beagnach, bheadh
/e:/	déag, céad, éad

As noted earlier, the spelling <ae> is typically used for /e:/ after broad consonants, and may also be used before them, as in *Gael*, *aer*. Thus <ae> can also be thought of as a broad vowel spelling for the sound /e:/, when broad consonants are on either side. Between a broad and slender consonant, <aei> may be found representing /e:/ as in *traein*.

Between two broad consonants, an extra written vowel may occasionally appear on both sides of the pronounced vowel: *buíochas*, *suíochán*, *draíocht*. Such sequences, however, are fairly rare.

### RULES 3

#### Spelling rules for slender vowels

1. The sounds /e/ and /e:/ are spelt <e> and <é> respectively, after a slender consonant at the end of a word. They are spelt <ei> and <éi> between two slender consonants.
2. After a slender consonant and before a broad one, /e:/ is written <éa> and /e/ occurs only rarely as <ea>, a spelling usually pronounced more like /a/.
3. Between two broad consonants, /e:/ is written <ae> (in Munster, it may also be written <ao>) and after a broad consonant but before a slender one, <aei>.
4. The short vowel /e/ does not usually occur after broad consonants, except in a few words in some dialects, spelt <oi>, e.g., *toil*. On either side of slender consonants, /i/ and /i:/ are written <i> and <í>.
5. After a broad consonant, the intervening vowel that marks the consonant is usually <u>, but may be <a>, especially at the ends of words, and more rarely <o> (as in *croí*).
6. Before a broad consonant, <i> or <í> is usually followed by <o>.
7. Between two broad consonants in Connacht and Ulster, <ao> is normally used instead of <í>, and <aoi> is found after a broad consonant at the ends of words and before a consonant that has become slender for reasons of grammar (case, plurality, comparison, etc.).

***Broad vowels, slender consonants:***

Similarly, when the broad vowels, those written <a>, <o> or <u> and their long counterparts, are followed by slender consonants, a slender vowel, always <i>, comes before the consonant to identify its quality: Examples are given below:

- /a/**    **cailín, aimsir, caite, maidin, bainne, airgead, baile**
- /a:/**    **báid, náid, fáil, fáinne, dáil, Cáit**
- /o/**    **scoil, sroichim, cois, cloisim (pronunciations vary regionally)**
- /o:/**    **fóill, cóir, bádóir, seafóid, bróige, óige**
- /u/**    **amuigh, cuid, muid, chuici**
- /u:/**    **dúil, cúis, dúisigh, ciúin, dúinn, dochtúir, cúig, súil, múineadh**

Note: before a slender consonant the sequence <ui> usually represents /i/, but occasionally /u/ is heard, as in the above examples from various published sources. The pronunciation /u/ is particularly likely in northern dialects.

When a slender consonant comes before a broad vowel, the inserted vowel is <e> before <a> or <á>, <i> before <e>, <é>, or <o> and <e> before long /o:/. In the examples below, the pronounced vowel is bold.

- /a/**    **bean, fear, deas**
- /a:/**    **bre**á**, Seán**
- /o/**    **li**o**m, si**o**pa (Ulster)**
- /o:/**    **be**o**, te**o**cht, ce**o**, le**o**, le**o**r, ghe**o**bhaidh, de**o**r, le**o**n**
- /u/**    **fi**u**ch, fli**u**ch, ti**u**bh (also may be spelled<io>: sioc, siopa (Connacht, Munster)**
- /u:/**    **ci**ú**nas, si**ú**l**

Note that there is not usually a fada on the /o:/ after a slender consonant plus <e>.

The long broad vowels may, on occasion, be found between two slender consonants, in which case an <i> is added after the pronounced vowel between slender consonants

- /a:/**        = <eái>            She**á**in, coinne**á**il, feice**á**il
- /o:/**        = <eoi>            de**o**ir, be**o**ir, ce**o**il
- /u:/**        = <iúi>            ci**ú**in, shi**ú**il

## RULES 4

### Spelling rules for broad vowels

1. Broad vowels written <a>, <o>, <u> and <á>, <ó>, <ú>, are written alone when all consonants next to them are pronounced broad.
2. They are always separated from a slender consonant that follows them by the addition of a silent <i> between the pronounced vowel and the consonant.
3. A preceding slender consonant is usually identified by silent <i> before the vowels <u> or <ú>, but by <e> before other broad vowels.
4. Short /o/ is spelt <oi> between a broad and slender consonant in some dialects: *oifig*, *scoil*, *croith*, and <eo> on the rare occasions it is found after a slender consonant, either finally or before a broad C (e.g., *deoch*, *seo*).
5. Short /u/ is spelt as <u> between broad consonants (*dul*), <iu> after a slender consonant (*fliuch*), and (rarely) <ui> before a slender consonant (*amuigh*).
6. The same rules apply for long vowels, with the additional provision that /o:/ is not marked with a *fada* in the sequences <eo> or <eoi>, although these spellings are usually pronounced as long /o:/.

### Unpronounced initial vowels

Sometimes a silent vowel is found in spelling at the beginning of a word (underlined below), before the pronounced vowel (in bold below). If the silent vowel is broad, it indicates that the final consonant of a particle preceding it should be pronounced as broad.

uisce, an t-uisce

oileán, an t-oileán, an oíche

These are pronounced with a broad /t/ and /n/, signaled by the initial vowel. Compare *an t-im*, where the /t/ is slender, in agreement with the vowel <i> that follows it, and *an iníon*, where the /n/ of *an* is pronounced slender in this context.

When the silent vowel is slender, it signals that a preceding consonant will be pronounced as slender, as in *ionad*, where the pronounced vowel is the <o>, but *an t-ionad* is pronounced with a slender /t/, as in *an t-im*. Other examples of silent initial <i> in the frequent word list are *iontach*, *iontas* and *iompair* (but see Chapter 9 for discussion of dialect variants where the <i> is pronounced).

## Diphthongs

The diphthongs /iə/, <ia> and /uə/, <ua>, although written with two symbols and consisting of two distinct vowel sounds, function like single long vowels in Irish. They are counted as part of a single syllable.

One-syllable words:	<i>bia, siar, Dia, dian; nua, bua, cuan, crua</i>
Two-syllable words:	<i>blianta, cnuasach</i>

Other Irish diphthongs are /ai/ and /au/. These are written with a combination of vowels and consonants, which together make up the spelling of the diphthong.

/ai/	<adh>, <agh>, <aidh>, <aigh>	Tadhg, radharc, praghas, aidhm, saighdiúr, staighre
/au/	<abh>, <amh>	dabht, leabhar, labhair, damhsa, samhradh

When the vowel /a/ follows one of these diphthongs, it may merge with it so that two syllables become one, as in *radharc* and *praghas* (/rairk/, /prais/) or *leabhar* (/l'aur/) above.

English loanwords like *praghas* and *dabht* can serve as useful mnemonics for this spelling pattern. Other spellings such as <ogh> can also represent these diphthongs, at least in some dialects, but they are less common and less consistent: *rogha*, *toghchán* are examples from Connemara Irish.

Diphthongs may also be followed by slender consonants, in which case the letter <i> is added, as with simple vowels.

Brian	a Bhriain
uan	uain

The same is true for diphthongs created from /a/ and lenited consonants. Because <gh> and <dh> merge with the vowel, the difference in pronunciation is negligible. So *saghas* and *staighre*, or *Tadhg* and *aidhm* can be considered simply as alternative spellings of the same sound. But in most dialects a slender <bh> or <mh> sounds rather different from a broad one. Whereas the broad sound is more like /w/ and forms a diphthong with the preceding vowel, as in the examples above, the slender one often sounds more like an English /v/, and continues to be heard as a separate sound, as in *Gaillimhe*, *aimhréidh*, *aibhneacha*, *saibhir*, and so on.

## Chapter 6 Resources

1. To hear words in Irish used in examples here, type the word sought into <https://www.abair.ie> or <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fuaim>
2. Phonics materials such as *Fónaic na Gaeilge* (BELB/Áisaonad) offer teacher and pupils resources for presenting these sounds to beginner readers. Can be downloaded at [http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic\\_na\\_Gaeilge.html](http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic_na_Gaeilge.html) Also *Cód na Gaeilge, Ag Fiosrú Focal* (CCEA) a newer set of phonics resources for Irish available from <http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/codnagaeilge> Gill Education (2013) *Fonn Fónaice*. Interactive Irish phonics resources for purchase on CD-ROM. <http://www.gilleducation.ie/primary-irish/primary-irish/fonn-fnaice-diosca> See pp 119.

3. An tÁisaonad offers a range of materials free <http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/> *Túsphuimeanna* is a set of downloadable booklets to teach sounds. . Muintearas has also published materials focusing on Irish phonics, available from <http://www.muintearas.com/leabhar.htm> These include *Na gutaí fada agus na consain*; *Na gutaí fada: Leabhar Oibre*; *Na gutaí gearra agus na gutaí gearra le chéile*; *Na consain agus na gutaí gearra*.

# Chapter 7

## Spelling to sound: The ‘Secret Decoder Ring’

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### How do you handle new words in Irish?

Learners of Irish as a second language may not have fully mastered the sound system of the language when they begin reading. They may not hear or produce accurately the subtle distinctions that differentiate it from their native language and that lie behind the principles of spelling outlined in the previous chapters. Good preparation in pronunciation of Irish can help, but more direct assistance with matching sounds and spellings is also essential for most pupils. The fundamental puzzle that faces learners when they encounter written Irish is: “What do all those letters represent and how do I pair them with sounds I know so that I can recognise spoken words I may already have learnt?” For words that the learner has not previously encountered, the challenge is to work out the pronunciation from the spelling so that once its meaning is understood, the word can be used in conversation. For vocabulary building purposes, the spoken and written forms can reinforce each other, but only if learners have the skills to connect them.

Accordingly, this chapter approaches the problem of sound-spelling correspondences from a different direction than in the previous chapters. Rather than trying to explain the rules of Irish spelling, we describe here how the words seen on the page can be sounded out, enabling learners not only to sound out words they know, but to pronounce unfamiliar words as well. The order of the summary in the Guidelines 1 for Teaching Vowel Spellings (on the following page) is just a suggestion. These patterns can be taught/studied in any order, depending on learners’ vocabulary and the materials the class is using for reading. Whenever enough examples appear to show a pattern, we point them out in Summary or Guideline boxes. In addition, we offer exercises in Chapter 9 that can be used to clarify and cement understanding of the pattern for future reference. For chapters 7, 8 and 9 we recommend that readers use some of the online resources suggested below to hear words sounded out.

Teanglann - Phonetic database for Irish (Bunachar Foghraíochta) at [www.teanglann.ie](http://www.teanglann.ie) This website offers online dictionaries: English-Irish (de Bhaldráithe, 1959) and Irish-English (Ó Dónaill, 1977), and any word selected can be sounded out in each of the three dialects, by real (not synthesized) voices.

ABAIR - The Irish Language Synthesiser ([www.abair.ie](http://www.abair.ie)) uses Text-to-Speech (TTS) synthesis to turn written text into speech, making it possible to input text and have it sounded out in Donegal, Connamara and Munster Irish.

## GUIDELINE 1

### Guideline for teaching vowel spellings

1. Words with vowels and consonants that match in quality are the least difficult; they can easily be sounded out and offer a good start for junior classes and adult beginners: e.g., *tirim, solas, bád, te*.
2. Long vowel digraphs <ao> and <ae>, when surrounded by broad consonants can also be taken up early, to illustrate digraph sequences unlike those familiar from English spellings: *saor, tae, aer*. If <eo> is included here, in words like *beo*, note that the vowel is pronounced long but spelt exceptionally without a *fada*.
3. <ia> and <ua> can be learnt early as they are very straightforward in most early vocabulary: *nua, suas, bia, siar*. Cases of <uai> (e.g., *nuair*) and <iai> (e.g., *bliain*) can be saved until later. Quality can be introduced first with long vowels, where the pronounced vowel is clearly identified by the *síneadh fada*: <ái>, <óí>, etc. The pattern of Broad V+ slender C' is the most consistent and therefore a good starting point. These cases always add an <i> before the C'. Thus, any sequence <Vi> represents a slender C' after the vowel, which could be any broad vowel: *báid, súil, fóill*. Long vowel digraphs work the same way and can be introduced next: <aoi>, <eoi>, <aei> always come before slender consonants: *cathaoir, ceoil*. The diphthongs <uai> and <iai> may also be introduced at this point. Other patterns of vowels marking consonant quality can be introduced little by little.
4. The most difficult patterns for most learners seem to be in the short vowel sequences, where it is hardest to know which is pronounced and which is just marking a consonant next to it. What a learner wants to know in these instances is “which vowel do I pronounce when I see <eai>?” In the remainder of this chapter we give some rules of thumb, which can be introduced gradually, interspersed with other activities, to prevent overload. The sequences <ea> and <eai> are commonest in early vocabulary, so the discussion below will start there. The next sequences, <ei>, <ui> and <ai>, are the most consistent across and within dialects, and could profitably be taught next. The messiest sequences are <io> and <oi> because they vary the most, and their pronunciation cannot always be predicted easily. These may be best tackled after learners have better grounding in the spoken language and a basic understanding of how other digraphs work to signal both pronounced vowel and adjacent consonant quality (slender or broad).
5. Diphthongs other than those written <ua> and <ia> vary more across dialects than most single vowels and therefore may present a more difficult learning curve. The most consistent spellings are <adh, aidh, agh, aigh>, usually pronounced /ai/ as in the English *mine*, and <amh, abh>, which are usually pronounced /au/ as in English *how*. These are also the spellings most commonly found among the frequent words that form the basis of this presentation, with <o(i)gh, o(i)dh, eadh, eamh, eigh, eidh, eimh> occurring less frequently and presenting greater complexities of variation, to be discussed in chapter 8.

Approached in this way, consonant spellings in Irish fall into place reasonably straightforwardly, as shown in the Guidelines 2 box (Guidelines for Teaching Consonant

Spellings) below. The main challenge is the broad/slender distinction, since both qualities use the same consonant symbols, but in the context of different vowels. The distinction can be introduced as the reason for the various sequences of vowel spellings. The understanding of what those vowel sequences mean can be reinforced one at a time. Pupils may also benefit from explicit examination of a few other aspects of consonant spellings, outlined in Guidelines 2.

## GUIDELINE 2

### Guidelines for teaching consonant spellings

1. **Mutations may require explicit help. Plenty of examples without the complications of consonant quality will be helpful at first:** *bhád, mbus, an-mhinic*, etc.
2. It is important to note that mutation forms may differ in their pronunciation by position. Table 5.1 showed the pronunciation of lenited consonants in word-initial position. In the middle of a word, <ch>, <th> are pronounced the same as initially; <fh>, <sh> are not found; <bh>, <mh>, <dh> and <gh> join with nearby vowels to create diphthongs (see Chapter 6). This could use a separate lesson, probably most appropriate at more advanced levels. In final position, some of these consonants are silent (see decoding rules below), or are pronounced the same as word-initially, depending on the regional variety.
3. The teaching of consonant quality in spelling is inseparable from the decoding of vowel sequences discussed in the previous guidelines. It is, however, worth pointing out that consonant letters, while quite similar to the way they are used in English, actually represent two sounds each in Irish, with the difference indicated by surrounding vowel letters. After introducing the basic idea that vowel sequences signal information about neighbouring consonants as well as the vowel that we hear in a word (see points 4 and 5 in the vowel guidelines), the patterns below can be used if needed to reinforce what has been taught in covering the pronunciation of vowel sequences in spelling.
4. Broad V before Slender C' = Vi: *báid, baile, fóill, cuid, súil*.
5. Broad V after Slender C' = eV: *beo, Seán*, but <iú> as in *siúl, ciúin*.
6. Slender V before Broad C = V+a or V+o: *céad, díol*.
7. Slender V after Broad C = uV for <i>, <í> but <ae> for /e:/: *buí, tae* (equivalent pronunciation to <é>)
8. Broad C+Slender V+Broad C = <uío> or <aíoo>: *buíochas, suíochán, draíocht*. It is rare to find two broad consonants on either side of a slender vowel with the regular vowel+fada spelling, but it does occasionally occur, as in the examples shown here. Usually, though, digraphs (<ao>, <ae>) are used: *daor, saol, Gael*, as seen in the guidelines for vowel spellings.

## What counts as regular?

Assuming that the regular spelling patterns will be taught first, with exceptions covered as the individual words turn up, the first step in deciphering sequences of vowels is to determine the most regular pronunciation of each. The patterns of spelling regularity assumed here are based on those found among the most frequent 1000 words in a corpus of children's literature, the *Corpas Leabhar Gaeilge do Pháistí (CLGP)* (Hickey, *n.d.*). This view of regularity is considerably simplified from that of detailed linguistic analyses, such as Ó Siadhail and Wigger (1975) or Ó Raghallaigh (2013). *Regular* here is taken to refer simply to the commonest spelling patterns found in the subset of the corpus that has been examined, especially those found across dialects, in frequent words that learners are likely to encounter early on in their study of Irish (see Stenson & Hickey, 2016). We try to avoid too much abstraction in the rules that specify sound-spelling relations. Thus some spelling-pronunciation mappings might be arguably regular from the point of view of a thorough linguistic analysis of the language, but are here considered irregular because of their rarity in the corpus, or the complexity and abstractness of the rules needed to identify the pattern.

**1. Vowels and Diphthongs:** Assuming a standard vowel system of five short and five long vowels, regular pronunciations are taken to have approximately their IPA values (which are also those of most other European languages that use the same alphabet, apart from English), allowing for minor variations from dialect to dialect. Short /o/, for example, may be pronounced somewhat differently in Munster and in Connacht but as long as it is consistent across words it is treated as regular. Only when pronunciation differs within a dialect from the usual pronunciation *for that dialect* is it treated as irregular. The spellings <ia> and <ua> are regular for the diphthongs they represent, and <adh>, <agh> <aidh> and <aigh> are all regular for the pronunciation /ai/; <amh> and <abh> are regularly pronounced /au/.

**2. Unstressed Vowels:** In unstressed syllables, reduction of short vowels to schwa is the norm, at least outside of Ulster, and is counted as a regular pronunciation of any vowel non-initially (except in compounds like *seanduine*, *fíormhaith*, in which both elements of the compound are stressed as they would be if separated). As a rule, monosyllables in Irish are assumed to bear stress. Therefore, function words like prepositions, articles, and verbal particles, which are always unstressed, are treated as irregular on the grounds that beginning learners of Irish cannot be expected to know which monosyllabic words are stressed and which are not. Learners will need to be taught *not* to pronounce the full vowel in such words as *mo*, *de*, *an*, *is*, but rather to reduce them to schwa in each case.

**3. Vowel Digraphs:** The common long vowel digraphs are likewise considered regular spellings. Thus <ao> is a regular spelling for /i:/ in Connacht and Ulster or /e:/ in Munster; <ae> is a regular alternative to <é> and <eo> is a regular alternative to <ó>. The spelling usually depends on whether the adjacent consonants are broad or slender and is therefore mostly predictable. In the rarer cases where these spellings represent a different vowel (e.g., *seo*, *deoch*, which are pronounced with a short vowel, in contrast to *ceol*, *beo*), these spelling-pronunciation mappings are identified as irregular, and must be taught as exceptions when the individual words are introduced.

## Treatment of dialect variation

When dialects vary in the pronunciation of words in ways that lead to irregularities in some regions but not others, we have treated a form as regular if the phoneme-grapheme correspondences are regular in at least half of the dialects where the word is found, or if they are altered from the usual value of the spelling in general and consistent ways (as by the rules described below). For discussion of some of the more common patterns of cross-dialect variation, see Chapter 8.

## Decoding Irish spellings

The tables accompanying the discussion below summarise how to decode vowel sequences encountered in written Irish. The spellings are grouped according to their pronunciation in stressed syllables, with examples of at least one word showing regular pronunciation for each spelling.

### Long vowels

Whenever a sequence of vowels includes a vowel with a *síneadh fada*, that vowel is the one that is pronounced. The rest of the sequence marks the nearest consonants. So, only the <á> is pronounced in *Seán*, *Seáin*, as well as in *bád* and *báid*. The vowel <é> is what's heard not only in *cé* but also in *seaicéad* and *seaicéid*. The sound is that of the <í> in all of the following: *bí*, *buí*, *buíochas*, *bíonn*; the <ó> is pronounced in *dó*, and *dóibh*, and <ú> in *súl*, *súil*, *siúl*, and *siúil*. The pronunciation differences among the words in each set of examples are in the consonants next to the extra written vowels. In each case, the spellings represent different combinations of the vowel with consonants of different quality. Thus the phoneme /a:/ can be represented several ways depending on the consonants around it, as follows:

- <á> between two broad consonants,
- <ái> after a broad consonant and before a slender one,
- <eá> after a slender and before a broad consonant, and
- <eái> between two slender consonants.

The added <e> and <i> tell how to pronounce the consonants in these situations.

Long vowels can also be written by vowel sequences without a *fada*, especially when the consonants before them do not match in quality. Here are the possibilities: <ae>, <aei> = <é> adjacent to a broad consonant: *aer*, *tae*, and *traein* (where the additional <i> identifies the next consonant as slender). <ao> = /e:/ between broad consonants in Munster, but <i> everywhere else: *saor*, *caol*, *caora*, and the same is true of <aoi> at the end of a word. But <aoi> before a slender consonant is identical to <í> everywhere: *Aoife*. Finally, <eo> and <eoi> are normally the same sound as <ó>. They are used after a slender consonant, with the <i> added when a slender consonant also follows: *beo*, *ceol*, *múinteoir*.

Each row in the Summary 1 Box shows the various vowel graphemes that have a single pronunciation. The difference between them indicates the quality of the broad or slender consonants on either side of them.

<b>Summary 1</b>		
<b>Regular Pronunciations of Long Vowel Spellings</b>		
<b>Spelling</b>	<b>Pronounced</b>	<b>Example</b>
<á>, <ái>, <eá>, <eái>	/a:/	lán, páiste, breá, eitleán, feiceáil
<é>, <éi>, <éa>, <ae>, <aei>, <ao> (in Munster)	/e:/	mé, féin, céad, tae, traein, saor
<í>, <íó>, <uí>, <uíó>, <aíó>, <oí>, <ao> (in Connacht and Ulster), <aoi>	/i:/	bhí, díol, suí, suíochán, draíochta, croí, saor, daoine
<ó>, <óí>, <eo>, <eoi>	/o:/	tóg, dóibh, ceol, feirmeoir
<ú>, <iú> <úi>, <iúi>	/u:/	cúramach, siúl, súil, ciúin

The choice of spelling on each line depends primarily on the quality of the adjacent consonants, which is why awareness of the phonetic differences between broad and slender, and ear training to be able to identify them is so important, for spelling/reading as well as for accurate pronunciation (and grammar).

**Short vowels**

These are somewhat more slippery, with greater variation across dialects as well as, in some cases, variation even within a dialect region. The primary patterns are listed in the Summary 2 Box, although in some cases there may be rather more exceptions to the regular pronunciation than there are for the long vowels.

## Summary 2

### Regular Pronunciations of Short Vowel Spellings

1. <a>, <ai>, <ea>: In Munster = /a/, as in *father*: *agus, maith, teach*.  
In other dialects, although <a> and <ai> may also be pronounced this way, <ea> is pronounced more as in English *cat*, as is <ai> in Ulster and at the beginning of a word in Connacht: e.g., *teach, cead, aimsir, ais*.
2. <ei> = /e/, as in English *bed*: *leis, eile, bheith, beirt*.
3. <i>, <ui> = /i/. Much like the vowel in English *fish*: *mise, cuid, tuigim*. Occasionally, <io> is also pronounced this way (especially) before <s>: *fiós*.
4. More often, however, <io> is pronounced as /u/ (as in English *put*) in Munster and Connacht and as <o> in Ulster: *siopa, liom, tiocfaidh, iomlán*.
5. <o> <oi>: Irish /o/ has less lip rounding and is pronounced with the tongue farther forward than in English, so that it sounds rather like the vowel of *cut* with slightly rounded lips: *doras, obair, os, loch, bocht*. The sequence <oi> may also be pronounced this way in some cases: *cois, scoil, sroich*. This is the least consistent spelling, with considerable variation even within dialects. In Connacht it often sounds like /e/ (as in the English word *bed*):

*scoil, toil, oiread, coille, oifig*

In Munster <o> <oi> is heard with equal frequency as /e/ or /o/, depending on the word.

In Ulster it is usually /o/. But for several words, the same spelling may be pronounced as /i/: *anois, coinneáil, roimh* (all), *oileán* (Connacht). Overall, based on frequency, the pronunciation /o/ is regular for Ulster, /e/ for Connacht, and either /o/ or /e/ for Munster.

Summary 3 Box offers a quick reference tool that can be used to decode vowel spellings of unknown words. Note that some pronunciations are limited to particular dialect areas. These are identified in the table using the following abbreviations: Cn = Connacht, M = Munster, U = Ulster. Variations can sometimes be found within a region, but are not considered here.

## Decoding Irish Vowels

Summary 3			
Decoding Irish Vowels: Summary			
LONG VOWELS			
Spelling	Pronounced	Examples	Notes
á, áí, eá, eái	/a:/	tá, páiste, breá, feiceáil	phonetic details vary Also <ao>, <aoi> in M: <i>saor, naoi</i>
é, éi, éa, éai, ae, aei	/e:/	mé, féin, céad, tae, traein	
í, ío, uí, oí aí, uío, aíó, ao, aoi	/i:/	bí, díol, buí, croí, rudaí, suíochán, draíocht, saor, daoine	<aoi>= <í> (in M only before a slender consonant (C')
ó, ói, eo, eoi	/o:/	tóg, dóibh, ceol, feirmeoir	
ú, iú, úi, iúi	/u:/	cúl, siúl, súil, ciúin	
SHORT VOWELS			
a, ai, ea, eai	/a/	cas, baile, sean, meaisín	<oi> = /o/ in U
e, ei (and oi in Cn&M)	/e/	te, leis, oifig	
i, ui, io (some)	/i/	bith, tuigim, fios	<io> rarely /i/
io	/u/, /o/	siopa, tiocfaidh, liom	<o> in U, <u> in Cn & M
oi	/o/, /e/, /i/	cois, scoil, oileán	/o/ mostly in U, sometimes elsewhere

## Additional Pronunciation Rules

In particular contexts, pronunciations resulting from regular phonological processes may differ from what the spelling would lead one to believe. When these processes apply widely and generally, they can also be treated as teachable regularities. Most of these patterns would likely not be taught explicitly as patterns until more advanced levels, although beginners may encounter specific examples of many of them fairly early. The list below describes a few of the rules that alter pronunciations in certain groups of words. These words can be considered to have regular and teachable spellings in the contexts where the pronunciation changes take place.

**1. Double Consonants:** Doubled consonants <nn>, <ll>, <rr> are pronounced like their single-letter counterparts in many cases, although they were historically different and some dialects still distinguish them (see Chapter 8). The details of the differences, where they exist, are subtle and in the process of undergoing change across generations of speakers, and are therefore fairly advanced-level pronunciation patterns. For the purposes of understanding the rules of decoding spellings, the pronunciations can be considered regular whether they are pronounced exactly like their single counterparts, as in Munster dialects, or somewhat differently in certain cases, as elsewhere. What is common to all the dialects, however these double consonants are pronounced, is that they may have an effect on the pronunciation of the vowel before them. This is described in the next rule.

**2. Vowel Lengthening:** A consistent rule lengthens pronunciation of a vowel before double consonants, unless they are themselves followed by a vowel within the same word. The same thing happens to vowels before the single letter <m>, and also before a single letter <n> when it is followed by another consonant (but not word-finally). For example, words like *ann*, *am*, *fonn*, *mall*, *carr* are regularly pronounced as if the vowel had a *síneadh fada* or, in some areas with a diphthong /au/ or /ai/. Although details vary with the dialect (see Chapter 8), what is regular is the fact that a change of pronunciation regularly takes place in the vicinity of these consonants, producing such contrasts as shown in Summary 4 Box.

<b>Summary 4</b>			
<i>Lengthened Vowels with Doubled Consonants</i>			
Long - final	Long - before C	Short - before V	Short - single C
cinn	cinnte	cinneadh	cion
tinn	tinte	tinneas	tine
geall	geallta	geallúint	geal
ceann	ceannfort	ceannas	ceana
donn		donnóg	don, dona

**3. Added Vowels:** Two consonants at the end of a word or syllable, and not pronounced with the tongue in the same position, typically have a neutral vowel (schwa) pronounced between them so that they sound like two syllables. Examples include *gorm* /gorəm/ 'blue,' *ainm* /an'əm/ 'name,' *dearg* /d'arəg/ 'red,' and *banbh* /banəv/ 'piglet.' This occurs quite predictably and is therefore considered a regular rule of pronunciation even though the vowel does not appear in spelling. These words can be taught as a group, to call attention to the kinds of consonant sequences that are affected. It may also be useful to note that similar pronunciations can also be found in Irish English, in words like *film* or the name *Colm*.

**4. Silent final consonants:** Certain consonants that have been lenited historically are unpronounced in word-final position in some dialects. This is particularly true of the grapheme <th>, which is often silent in all dialects, but also of <dh>, <gh>, <mh> and <bh> in Connacht and Ulster, especially in unstressed syllables (e.g., *Gaillimh*, *ceannaigh*, *agaibh*, *bualadh*). The letters are retained in the official spellings because they are sometimes pronounced in some dialects. When a <th> is at the absolute end of a sentence or phrase, for example, it is likely to be silent, as in *go maith*, although an /h/ may sometimes be heard. It appears far more frequently and clearly, however, when a word starting with a vowel follows it, as in *Cailín maith í*. The others display different patterns. At the ends of words in Munster, <gh> and <dh> are usually pronounced as /g'/, especially when slender, in words like *aghaidh*, *tiocfaidh*, *cheannaigh*.

**5. Raised Vowels:** In the vicinity of a nasal consonant (<m>, <n>, <ng>), especially in front of one and sometimes after as well, the vowels written <e> and <é> are pronounced with the tongue slightly higher in the mouth, so that they sound like /i/, /i:/ and <o>, <ó> are pronounced as /u/ and /u:/. In the following words, the letters <o> or <ó> sound (in Connacht and Munster) as if they should be written <u> or <ú>: *liom*, *seomra*, *long*, *cónaí*, *mó*, *nóiméad*, *tráthnóna*, *fonn*, *trom*. Likewise, but less frequently in the data this description is

based on, an <e> or <é> may sound like <í> or <i> as in *dhein*, *déanamh*, *céanna*, *greim* (which is also pronounced long, due to rule 2 above).

**6. Loss of nasality:** In Connacht and Ulster, an <n> after another consonant is pronounced as (non-nasal) /t/, in words like *mná*, *cnoc*, and so forth. This can also be considered to be a regular sound-spelling pattern in the relevant dialects.

If pronunciations resulting from the six rules listed above are taken as regular, the regularity in the most frequent 1000 words of the children's corpus rises to nearly 85%. This is an impressive degree of regularity, which is worth exploiting. But because the rules are so different from those of familiar English spelling sequences, it is not easy for learners to figure them out for themselves. Pointing out the patterns as rules of pronunciation can therefore be helpful in speeding the beginning Irish reader's progress in accessing the written words.

## Chapter 7 Further reading

1. More detailed analysis of the sound systems of various Irish dialects can be found in the following monographs listed in full in the references: de Bhaldraithe (1975) and Ó Curnáin (2007) for Galway, de Búrca (1970) and Mhac an Fhalaigh (1968) for Mayo, Wagner (1979), Quiggan (1906) and Sommerfelt (1922) for Donegal, and in Munster, Ó Sé (2000) for Kerry, Ó Cuív (1944/1983) for Cork, and Breatnach (1947) for Waterford. O'Siadhail and Wigger (1975) provide a detailed cross-dialect analysis of Irish phonology, and Ó Siadhail (1989) gives a shorter overview in English. Ó Raghallaigh (2013) provides comparative analyses of the sound systems for the Irish of An Cheathrú Rua (Connemara), Corca Dhuibhne (Kerry) and Gaoth Dobhair (Donegal).
2. The *Gaeilge Bheo* series from ITÉ has good accessible descriptions of various points of Irish grammar and pronunciation. Most do not provide phonetic transcriptions, but work strictly from spellings. However, some of them may be useful for their discussions of the ways pronunciation of particular spellings may change in certain contexts for particular dialects, which can help in understanding the phonological variations from one region to another. These books include Ó Baoill (1996) for Donegal, Ó Sé (1995) for Kerry, Ó Buachalla (2003) for Cape Clear (Cork), and Ó Murchú (1998) for Galway.
3. *Our Fada* (Ó Snodaigh & Ó Domhnaill 2012) contains lists of minimal pairs for vowel length (words differing only in the presence or absence of a *síneadh fada*).

## Other resources

Several dictionary websites also provide pronunciations for many individual words in different dialects. Foras na Gaeilge offers several dictionaries online at <http://www.teanglann.ie>, with selected words recorded in each of the three major dialects. Click on the desired dictionary and then select the tab Foghraíocht, and click on a letter of the alphabet to see the recorded words starting with that letter. The online dictionary at <http://www.focloir.ie> also has recorded pronunciations from the three dialects for selected words (only in their citation forms for the most part). The recordings at <http://www.abair.ie> are synthesized, but can be searched for any form of any word. A website associated with Ó Raghallaigh (2013) <http://www.fuaimanna.ie/> also offers recorded pronunciations for the three dialects he worked with.

# Chapter 8

## Exceptions and Variation

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Identifying consistent rules is great - but unfortunately not everything works according to the rules. Although Irish spelling is not as irregular as English spelling, over 15% of the most frequent 1000 words from an Irish corpus (*CLGP*) do not follow the patterns described in the preceding chapters. Moreover, a number of words have a regular pronunciation by the spelling-sound rules of Chapter 7 in some regions but not in others, so the notion of regularity can be somewhat fluid, depending on what regional variety is being spoken and taught. This chapter details some of these irregularities and variant forms, and how to handle them. Fortunately, even the irregular forms are patterned to some extent, and can therefore be learned in groups, which eases the task.

### Patterned Irregularities: Stress

Most of the irregular pronunciations in the most frequent words of the children's corpus fall into one of two categories: words that are not stressed on the first syllable but cannot be described by the Munster stress shift rule, and irregular preposition forms.

The regular pattern in Connacht and Ulster is for stress to fall on the first syllable of a word (whereas in Munster, a long vowel (or the ending *-ach*) in later syllables attracts the stress from an earlier short vowel). Deviations from this pattern (of stress on first syllable) include a group of words, all of which are time or place adverbs, beginning with an initial /ə/, usually written as <a>, but occasionally as <i> (if the following consonant is slender). These are the examples that are found in the most frequent 1000 words of the children's literature corpus:

#### *Time words*

*anois, ansin, anocht, aréir, amárach, inniu*

#### *Places/directions*

*anseo, ansin, anonn, aníos, anuas, aniar, abhaile, amach, amuigh, istigh*

A few more that do not fit these categories, but do have the same stress pattern and spelling, are *atá, arís,* and *amháin*.

#### *Less frequent time and place adverbs with irregular stress*

Other examples of time and place adverbs, not found in the top 1000 words of the corpus, but common enough to mention here, include the following:

*anuraidh, inné, isteach, anall, anoir, aduaidh, aneas.*

Since these are all similar in form, and fall mainly into readily recognisable categories of meaning, they can be more easily learnt and remembered as a group.

### *Grammatical particles, unstressed*

A characteristic of Irish is that it has a fairly large number of grammatical particles, typically consisting of only one syllable, that should not be stressed at all. Their vowels, at least when short, are generally reduced to schwas, regardless of spelling. These include the articles *an* and *na*, possessive pronouns *mo*, *do*, *a*, *ár*, *bhur*, and prepositions, including some combined forms, like *i*, *in*, *sa*, *sna*, *do*, *don*, *de*, *den*, *gan*, *chun*.

Even when their vowels are pronounced as written and not reduced, prepositions are not stressed<sup>3</sup>. These are among the commonest occurring examples of unstressed prepositions with the vowel not reduced, but still pronounced without stress: *ar*, *ag*, *ó*, *ón*, *faoi*, *faoin*, *trí*, *thar*, *roimh*, *fá*, *os*, *trína*.

Finally, most verbal particles are always unstressed, including copula forms like *is*, *ba*, *ab*, and the preverbal particles like *a*, *go*, *gur*, *dar*, *an*, and among those with fully pronounced vowels, *ní* and *nach*.

### *No stress or irregular stress*

Once these groups of words with exceptional stress are learned, only a very few remain with no stress or stress on a syllable that cannot be explained by the basic stress or the Munster stress shift rule. The ones from the most frequent words in children's literature are:

*fhios* in phrases like *Tá a fhios agam*, pronounced north of the Shannon as /**ta**:əsaɡəm/<sup>4</sup> (stressed syllables in bold),

*tráthnóna*, *dáiríre* and *arán* (the latter pronunciation is actually regular in Munster, according to the stress shift rule that governs pronunciations there) but is also found in regions where stress shift does not normally take place.

A few less common words, many of them borrowed from English like *tobac*, or *coróin* (bold shows the stress accent) which also have irregular second-syllable stress in all dialects. However, these are really quite infrequent.

### *Regionally specific stress irregularities*

Finally, some stress irregularities are regionally specific. Common examples include

Munster pronunciations of the prepositional pronouns *agam*, *agat* with second syllable stress on a short vowel; and

the Connemara/Mayo variant form of *éigin*, which is *eicínt* (bold shows the stress accent) as well as *uilig* (for *uile*).

<sup>3</sup> The exception here is when they are prepositional pronouns (*forainmneacha réamhfhoclacha*, e.g. *air*, *aige* and *uaidh*)

<sup>4</sup> In Munster this would be /**ta**:əsəɡum/

## Patterned Irregularities: Prepositions

Some irregularities in how vowels are pronounced are found in the prepositions and their pronoun forms. These can be learnt as part of the grammar of the forms themselves; it may be enough to point out that the pronunciations are not what might be expected from these spellings. In the case of *ar* and *ag*, not only is the sound of the vowel not what you would expect from the spelling (sounds like <e> rather than <a>), but neither is the quality of the consonant, which is pronounced slender, as in the 3rd person masculine forms with the incorporated pronoun. Some of the commonest irregularities are listed below.

**Ar:** /er/: sounds like *air*

In Munster, *orm* sounds like *oram*; in *uirthi* the first vowel is /e/.

In Connacht and Ulster the first vowel of *uirthi* is /o/.

**Ag** /eg/, **aige**. Here the vowel is pronounced /e/ or /i/.

Munster stresses the second syllable in *agam*, *agat*, *againn*, *agaibh*

Connacht often reduces the prepositional pronouns to one syllable: ‘*am*, ‘*ad*, ‘*ainn*. In *agaibh*, the final consonant is not pronounced, so that it sounds like *agaí*, and in the 3rd person plural form (‘them’) a consonant is added so it sounds like *acub*. These last two are examples of a pattern found in all two-syllable prepositional pronouns for these forms in Connacht.

Ulster has an alternate pronunciation without the <g> pronounced, and the vowel becomes a diphthong, so *agam* sounds like *aighim*.

**Ó:** The full vowel is regularly pronounced in the simple preposition, but in *uaim*, *uait*, *uaidh*, *uaithe*, *uathu* every dialect deviates from the expected pronunciation of <ua>. Each dialect is different but none are pronounced with the diphthong /uə/, expected from the spelling.

In Connacht, *uathu* is often reduced to one syllable, and the /b/ is added: /wo:b/.

**Do, De:** In Connacht, many forms of *de* and *do* fall together, and the <d> is often pronounced as <g> or <gh/dh>. Other irregular pronunciations of prepositional pronoun forms in the database are shown here, spelt as they would be written if the spelling directly reflected pronunciation.

Connacht: *dhom*, *dhuit*, *dhó*, *dóib*; *go*, *gon*, *gona*

Ulster: *domh* (/du:/), *dófa* (for *dóibh*)

**Chuig, chun:** *Chuig* and *chun* often lose the first consonant, and Munster pronunciation may leave out the middle one, too, reducing the forms to single syllables.

*Chun:* /ən/ in Connacht and Ulster.

*Chuig:* In Munster: *chugam* = /xu:m/, *chuici* = /xu:hi/, *chugainn* = /xu:n'/, *chucu* = /xuhu/.

In Ulster: *chuige* = /heg'ə/, *chucu* - /xu:/

In Connacht, all the forms of *chuig* are pronounced the same as those of *ag*.

**Idir** can be pronounced as if spelt *eidir* in Connacht and Ulster.

**Le:** *léi* sometimes sounds like *léithi* in Connacht, and *libh* (and other one-syllable forms) sounds like *lib*.

**Roimh:** In all forms of *roimh* the <oi> is pronounced as /i/.

In Munster, *roimhe* may be pronounced as *roime*.

**Trí:** The <t> of *tríd* sometimes changes in Connacht and Ulster to /h/ or /f/.

## Unpatterned Irregularities: Verbs

A number of very common verbs with irregular pronunciations appear in the most frequent 1000 words of the children's literature corpus. Because of their frequency and usefulness, these deserve attention. Several forms, which are irregular across the board, are listed below.

**Raibh:** Never pronounced with the expected vowel /a/, the pronunciation identified for <ai> in chapter 6, this verb form is pronounced either as /rev'/ or /rɔ/. The first pronunciation is more common in Munster, the second in Connacht and Ulster, but variation can be heard even within a region.

**Bheadh:** Pronunciations of the ending *-adh* vary from region to region, but all dialects share the irregular pronunciation of the /e/ rather than the usual /a/ of the sequence <ea>.

**Tabhair:** This and all related forms (verbal noun, future tense, etc.) are pronounced with a simple vowel rather than the /au/ diphthong suggested by the spelling <abha>. In Munster, the vowel is /u:/, in Ulster it is /o:/ and in Connacht, both are heard.

**Gabhail:** Like *tabhair*, this verb lacks the expected diphthong. It is normally pronounced as /o:/ in Connacht and Ulster, and as /a:/ or /av/ in Munster.

**Codladh:** The <d> is silent, unless followed by a vowel, as in *codail*.

**D'fhiafraigh:** The <f> in the middle of the word is silent.

**Tarraing:** The final consonant is pronounced as if the <g> were not there, i.e., as if it were *tarrain*.

**Arsa:** The first vowel of *arsa* is pronounced as schwa in Connacht and as /e/ in Munster and Ulster.

Other verbs are irregularly pronounced only in some dialects. These are listed below according to which form(s) show the irregularity.

**Bain:** All forms of this verb are regularly pronounced with the vowel /a/ in Connacht, but as /i/ in Munster and Ulster.

**Thaitin:** In Munster and Connacht, the middle consonant <t> is pronounced as if lenited <th>.

**Fill:** The vowel is not lengthened before the final <ll> in Connacht, though it may be even when a vowel follows, as in *filleadh*. In Ulster, *pill* is used instead of *fill* and the past tense form does not prefix <d>, but lenites, as in <phill>.

**Gheobhaidh:** In Munster and Ulster, the diphthong expected from the spelling <obha> is reduced to /o:/. In Connacht, the pronunciation alternates between regular /jowə/ and irregular /jofə/.

**Luigh** is pronounced with the diphthong /ai/ in Connacht, as is the verbal noun *luí*. In Ulster, *luí* sounds like two syllables, with /ai/ followed by a schwa at the end.

**Cuimhnigh:** The <mh> is typically silent and the <i> is long in Munster and Connacht, as if written <cuínigh>. Alternatively in Connacht, it may be pronounced with unlenited /m'/ (accompanied by the shift of /n/ to /r/: /kim'r'ə/, as if spelt <cuimrigh>).

**Amharc:** The regular pronunciation may be heard in all regions, but more commonly in Connacht it is heard as /afərək/ or /afrək/ and in Ulster it may be /aunjk/.

***Verb forms with irregular pronunciations in only one dialect***

The list below shows a number of irregularities identified in each dialect.

In Munster

*Rachaidh* may be pronounced /rai/  
*Ghabh* is sometimes heard as /gev/  
*Tiocfaidh* has a broad /t/, as if spelt *tucfaidh*.

In Ulster

In *shroich* the <sh> is silent  
In *d'fhreagair* the <d> is silent as in /rigər/.  
*Bualadh* sounds like *bolu*, and *leagan* sounds like *ligean*.  
The final vowel of *casadh* may be pronounced as /e/ in Ulster, rather than the expected /u:/.

In Connacht

*Tagtha* may be pronounced as if written *tiuctha*;  
*Téann* and *luí/luigh* are pronounced /ai/ (as if written *teigheann laigh*), and  
*Tógáil* is pronounced with slender <g>, as if *tóigeáil*.

***Irregularities in other vocabulary***

Other irregularities do not fall into specific groups. The first set identified below are common to all three dialects

**Table 8.1 Irregularities in other vocabulary**

<b>Irregularities common to all dialects</b>
<p>The initial &lt;f&gt; in <i>féin</i> is frequently pronounced as an &lt;h&gt;.</p> <p>The &lt;ea&gt;, usually pronounced as short /a/ is pronounced as /a:/ in <i>eagla</i> and <i>dea-</i>, and as /e/ or /u/ in <i>beag</i>.</p> <p>The &lt;eo&gt;, normally long /o:/ is short in <i>seo</i>, <i>deoch</i> and <i>eochair</i>.</p> <p><i>Crainn</i> is pronounced with a long /i:/.</p>
<b>Irregularities found in two dialects.</b>
<p><i>Arís</i> sounds like <i>aríst</i> in Connacht and Ulster</p> <p>The first vowel of <i>iontach</i> and <i>ionadh</i> is pronounced as /i:/, whereas the rules in preceding chapters predict an initial /u:/ as the regular pronunciation, which is found only in Munster.</p> <p>The &lt;ae&gt; of <i>captaen</i> is irregular in Connacht and Ulster. In Connacht, it is pronounced as if spelt &lt;í&gt; and in Ulster it is schwa, as in English <i>captain</i>.</p> <p>The first vowel in <i>éirigh</i> is the diphthong /ai/ (as if written <i>aighrigh</i>) in Connacht and Munster, instead of the expected /e:/, found in Ulster.</p> <p>The first consonant of <i>ceithre</i> is lenited, as &lt;ch&gt; in Connacht and Munster</p> <p><i>Nua</i> and <i>Domhain</i> are pronounced irregularly in Munster and Ulster lthough the irregularities are different in each area:</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>Nua</i> has an extra syllable in Ulster, sounding like <i>nuaí</i>, whereas in Munster the diphthong is reduced to &lt;nú&gt; or &lt;nó&gt;.</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">Ulster reduces the expected diphthong of <i>domhain</i> to simple /o:/ (as if &lt;dóin&gt;), whereas Munster irregularly uses the diphthong /ai/ (as if &lt;daghain&gt;).</p>

Finally, some pronunciations are irregular in just one dialect area, but regular elsewhere. Although all these pronunciations are equally legitimate, the standard spelling may not reflect some of them. For reference, Table 8.2 lists the words from the most frequent 1000 in the corpus of children's books that have an irregular pronunciation in one dialect. Whether they should be taught as irregular, of course depends on how they are pronounced by a given teacher (or in any recordings used in class), or how they are pronounced in the local area.

**Table 8.2: Unsystematic Irregularities**

<b>In</b>	<b>Orthography</b>	<b>Pronounced as if</b>	<b>IPA*</b>	<b>Regular</b>
Cn	cluiche	cluife	/klif'ə/	/klix'ə/
Cn	dorais	doiris	/der'is'/	/dorəs'/
Cn	croith	craith	/kra/	/kro/
Cn	cionn	cíonn	/k'i:nn/	/k'unn/
Cn	luch	loch	/lox/	/lux/
Cn	urlár	orlár	/aurla:r/	/u:rla:r/
Cn	oibre	aidhbre	/aib'r'ə/	/eb'r'ə/-/ib'r'ə/
Cn	coill	cadhaill	/kaill'/	/kill'/
Cn	tar	teara	/t'arə/	/tar/
Cn	nuair	noir	/nor'/	/nuər'/
M	roinnt	raidhnnt	/rainn't'/	/ri:nn't'/
M	prionsa	preabhnsa	/p'r'aunsə/	/p'r'insə/-/p'r'onsə/
M	deimhin	daighn	/dain'/	/d'ev'ən'/
M	diabhal	duíl	/di:əl'/	/d'aul'/
M	dtús	dtúis	/du:s'/	/du:s/
M	lámha	lá	/la:/	/la:wə/
M	oifig	ifig	/if'ig'/	/ef'ig'/
M	tinn	taidhnn	/tainn'/	/t'i:nn'/
M	laghad	luíod	/li:d/	/laid/
U	éineacht	eineat	/e:n'at/	/e:n'əxt/
U	boladh	bolthadh	/bolhu/	/bolu/
U	fathach	fách	/fwa:x/	/fahax/
U	cath	catha	/kahə/	/ka/-/kah/
U	rang	wrong (English)	/raŋ/	/raŋg/
U	gaoithe	gaoi	/gi:/	/gi:hə/
U	crua	cruaí	/kru:i:/	/kruə/
U	abhainn	óinn	/o:nn'/	/aunn'/
U	liathróid	learáid	/l'a:ra:d'/	/l'īəro:d'/
U	láimh	láif	/la:f'/	/la:v'/

\*Go to [www.teanglann.ie](http://www.teanglann.ie) to hear individual words if you are unsure about pronunciation.

## Dialect variation

The differences in preposition and verb forms seen above reflect the basic fact about Irish that the spoken language as used by native speakers differs regionally (as do all languages), and the forms of the *Caighdeán Oifigiúil* often reflect only one regional variant (and not always the same one). That is, there is no standard form of pronunciation for spoken Irish<sup>5</sup>, and learners who become fluent will typically adopt the speech patterns of the region where they acquire their Irish or the variety they have chosen to learn for their own reasons. It is important to have an awareness of the principal differences among the regions, not only in order to understand and transmit to learners why certain standardised spellings may differ systematically from the local pronunciations, but also to inculcate respect for the spoken forms of different regions and understanding of how the pronunciations that learners hear may legitimately vary from one speaker to the other. This is particularly important in classrooms outside the Gaeltacht where different pronunciations may be encountered from class to class, as different teachers may speak with different accents, depending on where or how they learned their own Irish. Understanding that this variation is as natural as the variation in English accents from county to county can go a long way toward reducing learners' frustration with the process of acquiring Irish. It can also be used to explain some of the puzzles of Irish spelling, which is designed to accommodate all pronunciations. This section details some further examples of the most salient dialect differences that may be encountered by beginning learners of Irish, with particular reference to implications for the spelling system.

The variation in pronunciation of <ao> as equal to <é> in Munster and <í> in Connacht and Ulster has already been mentioned and is one of the commonest distinguishing features (shibboleths), along with the Munster stress pattern, that differentiates the dialects spoken south of the Shannon from those spoken to its north.

Another salient difference previously mentioned is the tendency to move the tongue forward for certain vowels written with <a> in northern regions. The result is that the short <a> in Connacht, especially following a slender vowel or at the beginning of words, is pronounced more like the English vowel in *hat* than that of *father*, as it is in Munster. Examples include *bean*, *airgead*, and *ceannacht*. Ulster Irish uses this pronunciation for the long /a:/ (<á>) in many words, so that the name *Seán* in that dialect sounds very like *sean* to a Connacht or Munster speaker. Use [www.teanglann.ie](http://www.teanglann.ie) to search for specific words used as examples here, and go to 'pronunciation' to hear them spoken in the different dialects.

### Verbs

Systematic variation in verbal forms is also worth mention. Sometimes a particular verbal ending will differ consistently in pronunciation from one region to another. For example, the common suffix: *-adh* is pronounced differently depending both on the regional variety being spoken and on the particular function the ending has in a given sentence. These differences are summarised in Table 8.3.

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<sup>5</sup> While efforts were made to develop a *Lárchanúint* (Ó Baoill (1986), there appears to be little awareness of this.

**Table 8.3 Pronunciations of –adh**

Grammatical Function	Connacht	Munster	Ulster	Example
Verbal Noun	/ə/	/ə/	/u:/	bualadh
Conditional/Past Habitual	/əx/	/əx/	/u:/	bhuailfeadh/bhuaileadh
Past Impersonal	/u:/	/əx/	/u:/	bualadh

The verbal endings vary more straightforwardly among the major dialect regions. Several individual examples were listed in the last section. Others are more systematic. Future endings in *-fidh*, for instance, tend to be pronounced as /ə/ before a subject noun or pronoun, but when they occur before a pause, as in answers to questions, the full pronunciation remains /ə/ only in Connacht, but is closer to /i:/ in Ulster and /ig'/ in Munster. The same is true for other verb forms ending in <idh> or <igh>, such as *chuaigh*, *cheannaigh*, *theastaigh*, *éirigh*, *iarraidh*, etc. The pattern holds even for some non-verbs, like *réidh* and *amhlaidh* from the most frequent 1000 words. These are the most systematic recurring patterns among the common vocabulary most likely to be encountered by learners early on.

Other differences are more extreme and cannot be treated as simply variant pronunciations of the standard spelling but are in fact better considered to be different words from those of the standard. Examples from the data we have been drawing on include standard *tógáil* vs. Munster *tógaint*, standard *smaoineamh* vs. Ulster *smaoitiú*, and standard *leanúint* vs. Connacht *leanacht*. There are many examples of this kind of variation, especially in verbal noun and noun plural forms.

### ***Double consonants***

The consonants known as liquid and nasal that are written double (<nn>, <ll> <rr>) are partly merged in speech with their single counterparts, except for the effect they may have on a preceding vowel (which was discussed in the previous chapter). But the nature of the change is different across the major dialects, producing pronunciation variants that are worth noting.

**Munster:** Single and double pronunciations are identical: <nn> = <n>, and so forth.

**Connacht:** Broad consonants are pronounced alike whether spelt single or double, but are distinct if slender. Roughly speaking, the single slender <n> and <l> are more like the corresponding English letters (in the case of <l>, as pronounced at the beginning of the syllable), whereas the double consonants are pronounced more like the middle consonants in *onion* and *million* (even in word initial and final positions, where these sounds are not found in English).

**Ulster:** Distinctions are still maintained according to published sources, but according to the speakers and scholars we consulted, these distinctions are in the process of being lost among speakers of the younger generations. Based on transcriptions found in sources and through consultation with speakers and scholars, there appears to be considerable variation from word to word and speaker to speaker. These distinctions are likely to be among the last acquired by learners who choose to speak the Ulster dialect and will not be considered further here. The dialect monographs mentioned in the Further Reading section below give a good overview of the range of variation for those who may be interested in further details.

## Chapter 8 Further Reading

1. More detailed analysis of the sound systems of various Irish dialects can be found in the following monographs listed in full in the references: de Bhaldraithe (1975) and Ó Curnáin (2007) for Galway, de Búrca and Mhac an Fhalaigh for Mayo, Wagner (1979), Quiggan (1906) and Sommerfelt (1922) for Donegal, and in Munster, Ó Sé (2000) for Kerry, Ó Cuív (1944/1983) for Cork, and Breatnach (1947) for Waterford. Ó Siadhail and Wigger (1975) provide a detailed cross-dialect analysis of Irish phonology, and Ó Siadhail (1989) gives a shorter overview in English. Ó Raghallaigh (2013) provides comparative analyses of the sound systems for the Irish of An Cheathrú Rua (Connemara), Corca Dhuibhne (Kerry) and Gaoth Dobhair (Donegal). The last four chapters of Stenson (2008) summarise several salient aspects of dialect variation that are useful for learners to be aware of for purposes of cross-dialect comprehension.
2. Hughes (2008) *Leabhar Mór Briathra na Gaeilge/ The Great Irish Verb Book*, Clóann Bheann Mhadagáin/Ben Madigan Press discusses verbs in the three Irish dialects and in the Standard language, with lists of the verbs in different tenses.
3. For those looking for more detail on the dialects, see *Stair na Gaeilge: in ómós do Pádraig Ó Fiannachta* (1994) published by An Sagart (Má Nuad)
4. The *Gaeilge Bheo* monographs from ITÉ offer another source of dialect comparison. Most do not provide phonetic transcriptions, but work strictly from spellings. However, some of them may be useful for their discussions of the ways pronunciation of particular spellings may change in certain contexts for particular dialects, which can help in understanding the phonological variations from one region to another. These books include Ó Baoill (1996) for Donegal, Ó Sé (1995) for Kerry, Ó Buachalla (2003) for Cape Clear (Cork), and Ó Murchú (1998) for Galway.

## Chapter 9

# Exercises

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The exercises in this chapter are intended for learners of Irish and those who already speak Irish but want to improve their understanding of the patterns of Irish spelling. Teachers and student teachers working through the exercises will find some hints on how some of them could also be adapted for use (in small doses!) in primary school classrooms, to help children who are just developing their Irish and English literacy to make sense of the Irish system and its differences from that of English. The exercises here can be done in any order, as suits the needs of a particular learner or group. The ordering we present here begins with more general exercises for phonological awareness and proceeds to examine Irish-specific patterns for vowels and consonants, with simpler patterns preceding more sophisticated ones. If these exercises are used with pupils, it is recommended that they be used sparingly, in short episodes. It is important that they do not replace real reading activities for comprehension and pleasure, either for adult or child learners of Irish. However, we believe that judicious use may help increase the pleasure of reading in Irish as the patterns begin to make sense to readers. Most exercises should require no more than a few minutes and can be interspersed with other activities for language use, both oral and written. To hear Irish words or phrases used in the exercises spoken aloud, go to [www.teanglann.ie](http://www.teanglann.ie), search for the word required, and select which dialect(s) you want to hear it spoken in.

### Awareness exercises

The first set of exercises involves developing awareness of general patterns of pronunciation and spelling of Irish and the ways they differ from English.

#### ***Comparing Irish and English***

Exercises 1- 4 can help build learners' awareness of differences in the way English and Irish sound, and the different ways the same letters are used to represent the sounds of each language.

1. ***Listening out for differences.*** Pronounce similar words in English and Irish, to direct attention to the differences in how certain Irish sounds are produced (the <r>, final <ng>, vowels, broad and slender consonant differences). The following examples illustrate the differences, but for most classes it would be best to choose only a small number at a time, perhaps 5-6 pairs. They could be chosen to illustrate a single point, or a variety, depending on the class and the teacher's goals. Here, they are presented in random order to show the variety of differences that might be pointed out to a class, or discerned from listening to recordings of the Irish words and comparing them to their English counterparts. Many other pairs of words can also be found to illustrate particular points of pronunciation, once one is aware of the differences to be heard.

**Exercise 1. Irish or English?**

doras	Doris
fir	fear
eile	Ella
caoi	key
deir	dare
uncail	uncle
tú	too
long	long
níl	kneel
bhfuil	will
mé	may
léigh	lay
bóthar	Boer
táthar	tar
Cáit	caught
rang	rang
saor	seer
carr	car
luí	Lee
bean	ban
fear	far
ní	Knee

***Discussion and Activities***

Read 5-6 pairs of words from the above list and ask:

***How do the pronunciations differ for the Irish and its paired English word?***

***What patterns can we see here?***

***Why are Irish spellings different?***

Some of the differences illustrated by these pairs of words include:

1. Different pronunciations of /r/; in Irish it is pronounced by tapping the tongue quickly against the bony ridge behind the upper teeth (in making the English <r>, the tongue curls back, but does not quite contact the mouth at all). Compare doras/Doris, rang/rang, saor/seer, fear/far.
2. The broad <t> is made by placing the tongue farther forward than in English, right against the back of the teeth. Slender <t> is closer to the <t> of English. The same is

true for <d>, <n>, and <l>. Compare: doras/Doris, luí/Lee, long/long, bean/ban, tú/too.

3. Vowels are pronounced with somewhat tenser mouth muscles in Irish than in English. This is particularly noticeable in the long vowels. Irish vowels may be shorter than the comparable English vowel. Compare: doras/Doris, níl/kneel, deir/dare, mé/may, saor/seer among others.
4. Final <ng> is a single sound in English but in Irish the <g> is usually pronounced separately (*rang/rang, long/long*)
5. Broad and slender distinctions in Irish make for different pronunciations. In the above examples, the <l> of *luí* and *léigh* are pronounced differently, whereas in the English *Lee* and *lay*, the <l> sound is the same in both. Similarly, the <r> is pronounced differently in *deir* and *fear*, but in *dare* and *far* both are the same.
6. Recalling the earlier discussion (chapter 4) of the broad and slender phonemes /l/ and /l'/ and the predictability of the two phones [l] and [l'] in English, this contrast can be explored with examples from the above: *luí/Lee, bhfuil/will, níl/kneel, eile/Ella, long/long*.

### ***Other classroom activities using lists like this***

1. Hand out the written lists (or a subset, maybe 3-5 words at a time) of Irish and English word pairs. Pronounce one from each list, and have class call out 'Gaeilge' or 'Béarla'.

Read two words from each pair, sometimes in the same language twice: Children identify whether they are the same or different, e.g., Doris, Doris; doras, Doris; doras, doras; Doris, doras.

Read a series of three words, two from one language and one from the other. Pupils pick the one that is different by circling 1, 2 or 3 on a worksheet. Alternatively, pupils identify the Irish (or English) word in each set of three.

**Exercise 2. Loanwords**

Note how pronunciations differ in the pairs below. Most of these words are borrowed from English into Irish, but a few are Irish words that have been borrowed into English. What do the Irish spellings tell you about sound-spelling relations? As in Exercise 1, a subset could be selected each time this exercise is done, to reinforce learning and allow repetition of common patterns.

**Exercise 2**

<b>English</b>	<b>Irish</b>	<b>Differences</b>
uncle	uncail	
match	meaits	
policy	polasaí	
action	aicsean	
jacket	seaicéad	
check	seic	
whiskey	fuisce	
belt	beilt	
brochure	bróisiúr	
bicycle	baidhsicil	
telephone	teileafón	
price	praghas	
doubt	dabht	
breakfast	bricfeasta	
quilt	cuilt	
punch	puins	
colleen	cailín	
galore	go leor	
picture	pictiúr	
smithereens	smidiríní	
pill	piolla	
car	carr	

**Discussion and Activities**

Slender /l/ must be marked with <i> before it and <e> after. Slender /s/ spelled with <s> but must have <e> after and/or <i> before. Double <rr> shows long /a:/ in Irish. The complex spellings <agh> or <adh> are used for the /ai/ sound (the sound called “long <i>” in English), <abh> for /au/ (English spelling <ow> or <ou>). The sequence <fu> is used for English <wh>. The same exercises as above (English or Irish? Same or different? Which does not match?) can be used to tune pupils’ ears to the systematic differences between the two languages.

**Exercise 3. If English were written like Irish...**

-what would the following excerpts say? These sorts of exercises can help learners get used to the Irish spelling patterns and begin to internalise the rules. This is a more advanced exercise for those who have already begun to read. (It has been used successfully with adult learners in about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> week of study.) Teachers can probably work out the joke quite quickly, but it is worth attending to the actual spellings as a way of becoming acquainted with the spelling patterns and differences of pronunciation. Pay attention to the way the words are spelled, and the pronunciations (of a native Irish speaker) that they suggest. What alternative spellings might you think of for some of the words?

**Exercise 3**

Aigh nó a mean thú ios só léasaigh dat thí slíps in thios clós, bhéars a bíord, and dos nat smóc bíocos obh di trobal obh straighcein a meaits. It ios só lang suins thí did an anast déa's bhorc dat thí tincs 'meanúil léabar' ios de néim obh a Portúguís aiditéitear. [Lamhd Laftar]

From *The Best of Myles*

The examples below have been constructed following similar principles, but are based on nursery rhymes and other jingles more appropriate for young learners, and are easy to recognise once they begin decoding the spellings.

- a. Bhon paitéiteo, tú paitéito, trí paitéiteo, fór;  
fadhbh paitéiteo, suiocs paitéiteo, seibhin paitéiteo, mór.
- b. Méirí thead a liotal leam, liotal leam, liotal leam;  
Méiri thead a liotal leam, thios flíos bhos faight eas snó.
- c. Turtaí daes heat soipteimbir, éipril, diúin, eand noibheimbir....

Try creating some of your own. Start by finishing the lines below. Older pupils could choose their own jingles or song lyrics to write out in Irish.

- 1 Bhuí Bhuilí Bhuincí rean trú da tabhn....
- 2 Tbhuncil, tbhuncil, liotal stair....
- 3 Homptaí, domptaí, sait on a bhál.....
- 4 Ring a rabhnd da rósaí, a pacait ful obh pósaíos...
- 5 Aidhm leit aidhm leit fór a bheirí iompórtant deit

***Exercise 4. Playing with homographs (and non-homographs).***

Some words in the following list are Irish, some English, and some both (i.e., homographs, which have the same spelling in each language, but are pronounced differently in each). Working with these can help build awareness of the two spelling systems and where they do and do not overlap.

- a. Have pupils mark the words on a written list as *Gaeilge* or *Béarla*. Discuss the words that could be either language. How many noticed this fact?
- b. Using a subset of words that are all homographs (same spelling in each language) read the words aloud, sometimes in one language, sometimes in the other, and have pupils identify the language.
- c. Say *Gaeilge* or *Béarla* and have students read aloud with appropriate pronunciation. This will also help to provide awareness that there is nothing universal or inherent about the pronunciation of particular spellings. Rather, it is dependent on the language. Even English words like *near*, *sill*, *nice* or *seat* can be pronounced as if Irish, because the spellings are possible Irish ones. The same is not true of *truck*, *year*, however, because there is no <k> or <y> in Irish orthography. Likewise, *saor* cannot be an English word, because the sequence <ao> does not exist in English, but *cead* or *caith* could be (with different pronunciations of course—like those of *read* and *faith*). Many more examples of mutually possible spellings, or spellings that are possible in only one language can be used, drawing on words well-known to pupils in both languages.

**Exercise 4**

each	year
truck	lean
saint	seat
near	saor
cead	nice
sill	kid
chaith	bean

## Vowels: Stressed and unstressed

The following exercises focus on deducing vowel pronunciations from the written forms of words and phrases. As before, a selection of words from the following lists can be used for shorter classroom exercises. The words used (most are among the most frequent words in children's literature) are merely suggestions. Any word can be used if it has a regular pattern of stress.

### Exercise 5. Find the stressed vowel

Underline (or colour) the **stressed vowels** in the box (or adapt your own shorter list taken from it). Then *circle the unstressed vowels* that are pronounced with a reduced sound ('uh or 'ih'). [Note, answers may differ slightly depending on the regional dialect being spoken and taught).

### Exercise 5

cailín, baile, sagart, bláthanna, cosúil, máthair, cathaoir, feiceáil, timpeall, déanamh, éisteacht, féachaint, amadán, céilí, lámha, duine, leithéid, bhfolach, caitheamh, máistir, múinteoir, siopa, breathnú, sionnach, iarracht, bualadh, imirt, óige, foraois, tabharfaidh, rudaí, oscailt, chairde, theastaigh, cúramach, mbliana, iomaí, tagtha, captaen, dhúisigh, gairdín, aisteach, dearmad, fuinneog, thaitin, sneachta, marú, rompu, aisti, thiocfadh, coinneáil, deimhin, farraige, bóthar, buachaillí, abhainn, leigheas, beagán, leagan, tuairisc, córa, dochtúir, ceisteanna, buille, eatarthu, oileán, fadó, féidir, aimsir, maicín, eitleán, eitilt, íseal, liathróid, póilíní, iompar, buíochas, úsáid, Nollaig, soicind, cluiche, cloigeann, déanfaidh, sábhailte, carraig, agatsa, faitíos, bronntanas, tháinig, saighdiúirí, cathair, bosca, focail, foclóir, ospidéal, craiceann, móra, gabháil, cúramach, laethanta, sábháil

### Discussion

For the most part, in the words above, the first vowel is the stressed one. Vowels are reduced in later syllables unless they are long (either marked with a *fada* or one of the long vowel digraphs). In some dialects, pronunciation of verb endings is not reduced but pronounced with a clear vowel, usually either /i:/ or /u:/, e.g., *déanfaidh*, *caitheamh*. In Munster Irish, stress moves to long vowels in second (or later) syllables, and the preceding vowel may be reduced or not pronounced at all. Thus, which vowels are selected as stressed will depend on the variety of Irish being taught.

**Exercise 6. Irregular Stress**

a. The stress in the following words is, unexpectedly, on the second syllable in all dialects of Irish. Are there any patterns among these words that would help in remembering them?

**Exercise 6a**

amháin, atá, anseo, anois, amárach, anocht, aniar, aréir,  
 anseo, ansin, ansiúd, inniu, inné, arís, aníos, anuas, anoir,  
 istigh, amuigh, abhaile, anall, abhus, aduaidh, aneas,  
 tráthnóna, tobac, coróin, arán

b. All of these are inherently unstressed in all contexts. Many of them usually have reduced vowels as well. What do they have in common? Which tend not to reduce their vowels? What do they have in common?

**Exercise 6b**

an, na, go, mo, do, a, ar, ní, ár, ag, i, is, ba, in, dó, de, gur,  
 den, don, sa, sna, le, dhá, faoi, trí, os, má, mé, tú, sí, sé, í,  
 é, iad, siad, muid, sibh, ár, bhur, ab, roimh, dar, óna, lena,  
 gurb, ina, nó, nár, nach, má

**Discussion**

It is not that they are all very short (mostly one-syllable) words, because others, equally short are stressed and are not pronounced with vowel reduction, e.g., *im, cú, tá, bhí, sin, seo, lá, rí, cé, te, tar, am, mac, lig, ea, tí, lán, lár, bí, beo, luí, gá.*

Hint

Hint: consider the meanings and uses of the words.

**Exercise 7. Elision**

When two vowels come together across words, and one or both are not stressed, they tend to run together and one of the vowels is lost. For example, *duine atá...* is pronounced /din'əta:/, with just the one schwa pronounced for both the <e> of *duine* and the <a> of *atá*. If only one vowel is unstressed, that is the one elided, as in *duine óg*: /din'o:g/.

Cross out the vowels that would be elided (go unpronounced) in normal speech in the phrases in Exercise 7:

**Exercise 7**

daoine eile	Donncha Ó Ceallaigh
Tá an lá go deas	Tá sé anseo
Níl sise ann	Tá mé ag caint
Cé a bhí anseo?	anseo anois
Úna atá anseo	oíche álainn
duine ar bith	mise agus tusa
seomra Áine	deireadh an cheoil
Tá sé ina fhear	Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí

## Long vowels

### *Exercise 8. What's the difference?*

Minimal pairs are pairs of words that differ only in one sound, showing that the two sounds are distinctive (i.e. phonemes) in the language. Showing pupils minimal pairs can be a useful way to call their attention to differences they might otherwise be inclined to ignore. Here is a list of minimal pairs for long and short vowels (or in some cases, *near-minimal* pairs, with another difference as well, but the words are still quite similar).

### Exercise 8

Minimal Pairs	
solas	sólás
fear	féar
sean	Seán
arsa	ársa
te	té
ciste	císte
briste	bríste
cead	céad
paiste	páiste
mala	mála
foras	fóras
gaire	gáire

Near –minimal Pairs	
pota	póca
post	pósta
clocha	clóca
lacha	lách
baisteadh	báisteach
feirm	féir
ola	úlla
mil	míle
muc	múch
cupán	cúpla

### *Discussion*

The basic rule here is that, whenever a vowel in a sequence is marked with a *fada*, that vowel is the one that is pronounced. Everything else in the sequence is just giving information about the adjacent consonants.

### *Activities:*

Question: What is the difference between the two columns in each pair?

Use pairs to illustrate the function and importance of the *fada*.

### Exercise 9. Long vowels without a *fada*

Although the presence of a *fada* is a guarantee that a vowel is pronounced long (outside Ulster), some vowels without the *síneadh fada* are also long. Certain other spellings routinely indicate long vowels, similar to those spelt with a *fada*.

Match the vowel spellings by writing each word in the list below in the column headed by the long vowel that sounds the same as the sequence in bold.

**Aoine**, **saol**, **laethanta**, **beo**, **aer**, **gaoth**, **eolas**, **daor**, **tae**, **Gaeilge**,  
**saoire**, **ceo**, **taobh**, **aoibhinn**, **deora**, **faoi**, **traein**, **caol**, **lae**, **fuinneog**,  
**spraoui**, **reoi**te, **Iosrael**, **gheobhaidh**, **ceol**, **cathaoir**, **aerfort**, **naoi**,  
**strae**, **Eoghan**, **aoibhinn**, **Gaeltacht**, **aon**, **feoil**, **saor**, **Caoimhín**,  
**aerach**, **Aoife**, **seoladh**, **daoine**, **seomra**, **ae**, **caoi**, **feirmeoir**, **trae**

### Exercise 9

á	é	í	ó	ú

*Note that some words will appear in different columns according to the dialect being taught, as pronunciations vary from region to region in some cases.)*

#### Questions:

- 1 What spelling patterns do you detect?
- 2 Is there regularity with regard to which spellings match a particular vowel+*fada* (or diphthong)?
- 3 What *differences* can be seen in the consonants before and after these vowel spellings compared with simple spellings of a vowel + *fada*?
- 4 Can you think of any other words with the same spelling/sound pattern?
- 5 Are there any exceptions, where these same spellings are not pronounced long? (*captaen* in some dialects, *seo*, *deoch*, *eochair*)

**Exercise 10. More long vowels**

Say aloud the words in Exercise 10a.

**Exercise 10a**

carr, im, bord , tinn, poll, donn, ann, mall, ceann, geall,  
 barr, ball, bann, ime, carranna, tinneas, banna, ceann, carr,  
 fonn, am, cean, tinn, donn, bal, dall, mall, poll, crann,  
 clann, fearr, gearr, barr, bonn, cionn, thall, cinn, fill, trom,  
 amhras, timpiste, iontach, muintir, dar, fan, bun, gol, min,  
 ama, mar, don, mil, buachaill, inneall, filleann, bainne,  
 barraíocht, balla, dul, aidhm

\*Go to [www.teanglann.ie](http://www.teanglann.ie) to hear individual words if you are unsure about pronunciation.

Based on their pronunciation, put the words into columns in Exercise 10b, under the sound they match. (Note that certain words may be placed in different columns, depending on the dialect spoken or being taught. Speakers of some dialects may not have any words in certain columns, if that pronunciation is not found for these spellings in the area.)

**Exercise 10b**

<b>/a:/-&lt;á&gt;</b>	<b>/e:/-&lt;é&gt;</b>	<b>/i:/-&lt;í&gt;</b>	<b>/o:/-&lt;ó&gt;</b>	<b>/u:/-&lt;ú&gt;</b>	<b>/ai/-e.g. &lt;adh&gt;</b>	<b>/au/-e.g., &lt;amh&gt;</b>

The next exercise provides a somewhat different approach to the same patterns, and uses the same examples (although more can be added from the pupils' vocabulary).

**Exercise 11. Short or Long?**

In some words, the pronunciation of a vowel as long or short depends on the context where the letter appears.

- 1 Look at the lists below and try to detect the pattern to which vowels are long and which are short. (If you pronounce some of these as /au/ or /ai/, count them as long, too.)
- 2 Add any other words you can think of that fit the patterns.

**Exercise 11**

short	long	long	long	short	long
gar	gearr	donn	tinn	tinneas	garda
fear	fearr	fonn	cinn	coinneal	coinnle
bun	barr	bonn	roinn	roinneadh	cinnte
cur	carr	corr	cruinn	cara	cairde
mar	mall	poll	pinn	tharraing	timpeall
gol	thall	trom	im	ime	timpiste
mil	ball		mill	milleann	millteach
dul	dall		grinn	Nollaig	gairdín
	am			ama	
	ceann			ceannaire	iompair
	clann			bainne	iontach
	crann		rinn	rinne	muintir

*This exercise could be adapted to use with children by taking 2-3 sets at a time*

**Exercise 12. Long or Short?**

Which of the following vowel spellings in the words below represent long vowels (remember, there may not be a fada on all long vowels)?

Circle (or colour) those with long vowels.

**Exercise 12**

raibh, mé, isteach, leithscéal, cailín, ceann, beo, díreach, ceist, Seán, faitíos  
 Bríd, duine, daoine, fear, laethanta, dó, dúirt, chonaic, sean, léi, arís, seaicéad  
 áit, amháin, mór, déanamh, faoi, oíche, thosaigh, scéal, mbeadh, clann, leor  
 abhaile, máthair, bhíodh, deireadh, féidir, rá, athair, caoi, cinnte, páistí, féach  
 lár, mo, fearr, cónaí, dúinn, feiceáil, mall, bord, dearg, céanna, nóiméad, slí  
 airgead, cúig, barr, cheana, fiú, thuig, bán, tír, súil, deir, réir, im, dóigh, fadó,  
 smaoinemh, cuid, míle, bhaint, múinteoir, díobh, fágtha, amárach, ól, póca  
 fáilte, sionnach, scríobh, chóir, thall, fonn, áthas, inis, ainmhí, féin, iontas  
 captaen, cúl, sílim, tús, doras, fuinneog, ainmhí, tinn, cathaoir, Gaeilge, cur  
 gheobhaidh, snámh, imní, Dónall, trom, sráid, bocht, ciúnas, íseal,  
 codladh, náire, baile

Words from this list can be selected to exclude all spellings with *fadas*, or to limit the other long vowel spellings to only one type if that suits the lesson better.

## Short vowels

Short vowels can be trickier to decode, as they include no symbols like the *síneadh fada* to help decide which vowel to pronounce when two or more come together. The exercises in this section aim to raise awareness of what these sequences of vowels actually do in Irish spelling and how they operate to mark the vowels pronounced as short.

### *Exercise 13. Seeing the patterns*

Group the words into columns in which the (stressed) vowels are pronounced alike.

(Each set is grouped around a similar vowel spelling, although the pronunciations may vary. They can be given together or one vowel at a time).

### Exercise 13

maith, eochair, glas, dul, deis, minic, bean, daide, rud, eitilt, cluiche, siopa, airgead, dar, leat, cuid, lag, sagart, cat, deas, caith, cead, cailín, oileán, maimé, uimhir, fios, scoil, uisce, soir, cliste, doras, fios, fada, teach, luch, deir, bosca, turas, bainne

cupán, dona, loch, coinnigh, luch, bith, tuirseach, agus, anois, chuir, duine, iomaí, minic, solas

bheith, chonaic, seisean, cur, te, mise, thosaigh, baile, imigh, breá, deireadh, bean, tús, tar, tháinig, carr, trom, im, gaoth, tirim

athair, freisin, leaba, sise, bocht, roimh, ceann, ocras, cuma, dearg, liom, fanacht, focal, máthair, cistin, duine

leag, solas, tuirseach, tabhairt, eagla, aisling, lorg, thuig, deara, sula, raibh, d'oscail, cuid, cailín

**Exercise 14. Spot the difference (minimal pairs)**

In each pair of words below, there is one difference in spelling, and one in pronunciation of the words. In the first column, nearly every letter is sounded separately.

In the second column, the words have additional vowel letters, which are not pronounced as vowels. Circle these.

Then pronounce the two words on each line. What is the difference in pronunciation?

**Exercise 14**

fuair	fuair
bí	buí
masc	measc
min	mionn
línte	líonta
bád	báid
ní	naí
siúl	siúil
gan	gean
fál	fáil
scil	scoil
bó	beo

**Discussion:**

The difference heard is in the consonant that is next to the extra written vowel.

The extra vowel is signalling whether the consonant is slender or broad when it is different in quality from that pronounced vowel.

These can be called *consonant markers*.

**Exercise 15. Vowels and Markers**

- 1 The last exercise showed that some vowel letters are actually sounds, while others are consonant markers. Pronounce (or listen to teacher/recording pronounce) the words written in the table for Exercise 15 and circle the vowel you *hear*.
- 2 Then underline the vowel you *don't hear* and the consonant next to it.
- 3 What will the consonant sound like if you take that vowel away in spelling? (Sometimes removing the marker vowel will leave a different Irish word, with a different meaning. Sometimes what's left will not be a real word at all, but it is still possible to figure out what it would sound like if there was a word like it).

**Exercise 15.**

bean	ceo	buí	cuid	baile	báid
lean	beo	suí	muid	maidin	náid
sean	deo	luí	druid	maith	sráid
plean	leo	guí	pluid	cailín	bráid
gean	treo	tuí	buidéal	caith	ócáid
sceana	teo	cuí	fuil	bainne	comparáid
ceannach	gleo	buíochas	bhfuil	faitíos	ócáid
beach	leor	suíochán	druil	craic	úsáid
teach	deora	cuíosach	tuil	ainm	láidir
teacht	ceol	fuíoll	duine	ais	fáil
seacht	beola		suim	airgead	dáil
seachtain	leon			aire	sáil
leaba	meon				cáil

***Exercise 16. Putting it all together: nonsense words***

None of the words in the table for Exercise 16 are real Irish words (they are ‘nonsense words’), but they could be words in Irish. That is, they are spelled, and could be pronounced in ways that fit the rules of Irish phonology and orthography.

Sound out how they would be pronounced in Irish.

**Exercise 16.**

beas	daog	gaoi	cean	ceán
bill	gíor	nall	craeil	graobh
prís	páil	súr	cuin	cúin
claeim	marr	seilt	daer	breo
dann	meol	stall	plaoi	brinnt
dasta	dásta	aoimh	nael	doll
creaib	blonn	fraoin	súilleog	suid

## Consonants: Mutations

### *Exercise 17. Lenition and Eclipsis*

- a) Which of the consonants below may be affected by lenition? Circle them.
- b) Draw a line through the consonants that can also be affected by eclipsis

### Exercise 17

b	c	d	f	g	h	l
m	n	p	r	s	t	

- c) Now write the forms of each mutation for each consonant:

Consonant	Lenited form	Eclipsed form
b	bh	mb
c		
d		
f		
g		
h		
l		
m		
n		
p		
r		
s		
t		

***Exercise 18. Lenition for past tense***

Take the commands in the first box and write them in their past tense forms in the second box. Lenite the first consonant as appropriate, and add *mé*, to indicate that you performed the action. Then say the words aloud.

**Exercise 18**

Seas.	Bris an chailc.	Mínigh an freagra.
Scríobh litir.	Léigh an leabhar.	Dún an doras.
Ceannaigh bia.	Bain triail as.	Buail isteach.
Gearr an t-arán.	Póg Liam.	Lean an múinteoir.
Tosaigh ar ball.	Múch an tine.	Glan an teach.
Siúil abhaile.	Rith.	Caith é.
Dúisigh.	Tit a chodladh.	Nigh na héadaí.

<i>Sheas mé.</i>	<i>Bhris mé an chailc.</i>	

**Exercise 19.**

Make the following sentences negative.

What do you notice about how the verbs are pronounced?

**Exercise 19.**

<b>Abairt</b>	<b>Leagan Diúltach</b>
Feicim Seán.	<i>Ní fheicím Seán</i>
Baineann sé an féar.	
Imreoidh siad cartaí.	
Caitheann Bríd toitíní.	
Glanann sé tithe.	
Téann an bus ansin.	
Creidim é.	
Seasfaidh sí anseo.	
Léann siad filíocht.	
Posfaidh siad.	
Siúlann sé.	
Fiuchfaidh mé tae.	
Ritheann sí gach lá.	
Pléifimid an cheist seo.	
Scríobhaim.	
Ceannóidh mé carr nua.	
Déanann sí go maith.	
Brisfidh tú é.	
Tiocfaidh tú.	
Díolann siad bláthanna.	

***Exercise 20. Eclipsis***

Put the numbers 3 (+ lenition) and 9 (+ eclipsis) before each of the following words, with mutations where appropriate. Then try pronouncing the phrases you have written:

**Exercise 20.**

	<b>3+ séimhiú</b>	<b>9 + urú</b>
cat	<i>3 chat</i>	<i>9 gcat</i>
teach		
carr		
bord		
siopa		
carta		
leabhar		
fuinneog		
páipéar		
baile		
doras		
hata		
gúna		
póca		
maidin		
tine		

## Consonant quality

### *Exercise 21. Slender or Broad?*

Circle the slender consonants in the following words.

*Hint: They can be identified by the vowels that are next to them (whether pronounced or not).*

### Exercise 21

bád	leithscéal	páipéar	buí
duine	bó	cailín	buachaill
báisteach	beo	Síle	bialann
balla	caoi	díreach	scríobh
léamh	freagra	solas	minic
obair	ceist	saoire	Seán
Bríd	cosúil	cara	díol
daor	gloine	Máirtín	doras

**Exercise 22. Adding slender marker vowels**

Only the pronounced vowels are provided in the words below.

Complete the words by adding an appropriate vowel where needed to identify slender consonants (they are underlined).

**Exercise 22**

<u>S</u> á n	f u a r	f u a <u>r</u>	Ao <u>f</u> e
a n a m	a <u>nm</u>	<u>f</u> ei <u>c</u> á <u>l</u>	G ae <u>lg</u> e
á <u>t</u>	<u>s</u> a ch t a <u>n</u>	<u>fl</u> u ch	<u>s</u> o l a dh
<u>b</u> a n	P á dr a <u>g</u>	s ao <u>r</u> e	c l o <u>s</u> i <u>m</u>
p á p <u>é</u> <u>r</u>	á l a <u>nn</u>	<u>c</u> a d	<u>b</u> a l a ch
c a <u>rd</u> e	dh ú <u>s</u> i <u>gh</u>	bh ua <u>l</u>	m a <u>d</u> i <u>n</u>
<u>ch</u> a n a	a th a <u>r</u>	s á bh á <u>lt</u> e	l á <u>thr</u> a ch

**Exercise 23. Adding broad marker vowels**

Only pronounced vowels are provided in the words below.

Add vowels as needed to mark broad consonants, so that they obey *caol le caol, leathan le leathan*. Slender consonants are underlined.

**Exercise 23.**

<u>scr</u> í bh	c í <u>rf</u> i <u>dh</u>	<u>c</u> é d	<u>b</u> e gn a ch
<u>sc</u> é l a	b í ch a s	g a rd í	mh o th i g
<u>d</u> í t	<u>b</u> í nn	ch i <u>mhn</u> i <u>gh</u>	c ó n í
<u>d</u> é n a nn	<u>n</u> í r	<u>br</u> i sc í	<u>t</u> í g a r
d i <u>n</u> e	s í	naoi <u>d</u> é g	cl i <u>ch</u> e
b i <u>d</u> é l	<u>bh</u> í dh	a n i <u>s</u>	<u>b</u> é l

**Exercise 24. Marking Consonant Quality: broad and slender**

In the following words, only the pronounced vowels are written, and slender consonants are underlined. Add in the vowels needed to mark consonants, so that spelling obeys the rule of *caol le caol, leathan le leathan*.

**Exercise 24**

	Scríobh an focal
<u>S</u> á <u>nín</u>	
sm ao <u>n</u> amh	
<u>c</u> ú <u>n</u>	
a <u>nmhithe</u>	
cl ig ann	
<u>sí</u> nnach	
<u>t</u> ocf <u>idh</u>	
<u>br</u> i sc í	
dr í chta	

**Exercise 25. More markers of consonant quality**

In the following words, the quality of the consonant can be identified by the pronounced vowel next to it. Fill in the blank with the appropriate vowel to obey the spelling rule: *Caol le caol, leathan le leathan*. If no additional vowel is needed, just rewrite the word without a space.

**Exercise 25**

	<b>Scríobh an focal</b>
a msir	
Ca trí na	
f inn og	
Ba rbre	
saighd ú rí	
a thraigh	
éist acht	
b í chas	
píos í	
ceist anna	
muint ir	
múint oir	
iom í	
farr ige	





**Exercise 28. Match the syllables.**

The beginnings and ends of these words have been mixed up. Put them back together by drawing a line between the first and second syllables.

Exercise 28.

seach	áil
glan	eadh
deir	teoir
tóg	chail
múin	nóna
tuir	tain
tráth	adh
bua	seach

## Awareness Exercises: Text-based

Awareness exercises can also be built on whatever texts learners are reading. Two examples are given below; for purposes of illustration, they will draw on a storybook from the *Séidean Sí* series of graded textbooks and readers, called *Cá bhfuil mo dhinnéar?* The text is given first.

### *Cá bhfuil mo dhinnéar?*

Bhí Aoibheann ina suí ina cathaoir ard. Ní mó ná sásta a bhí sí. Bhí ocras uirthi. Thosaigh sí ag béiceadh. “Cá bhfuil mo dhinnéar?” arsa Aoibheann. “Tá ocras orm!” “Fan go fóill,” arsa Daidí. “Caithfidh mé prioslóir a fháil duit.” Fuair Daidí prioslóir agus chuir sé ar Aoibheann é. Ach ní mó ná sásta a bhí Aoibheann. Bhí ocras uirthi. Thosaigh sí ag béiceadh arís. “Cá bhfuil mo dhinnéar?” ar sise arís. “Tá ocras orm.” “Fan go fóill,” arsa Daidí. “Caithfidh mé babhla a fháil duit.” Fuair Daidí babhla. Chuir sé rís agus píosáí sicín isteach ann. Ní mó ná sásta a bhí Aoibheann. Thosaigh sí ag béiceadh arís. “Ní maith liom sicín,” ar sise. “Caithfidh tú é a ithe,” arsa Daidí. “Déanfaidh sé maitheas duit.” Shuigh Daidí síos agus thosaigh sé ag ithe a dhinnéir. Thosaigh Aoibheann ag ithe. Ach d’fhág sí na píosáí sicín ina diaidh. Tamall ina dhiaidh sin, tháinig Glic isteach. “Tar aníos anseo go dtabharfaidh mé bia duit,” arsa Aoibheann leis an madra. Léim Glic suas agus thosaigh sé ag ithe. Níor fhág sé a dhath ina dhiaidh. Bhí Aoibheann breá sásta léi féin ansin. “Tá mo dhinnéar ite anois agam, a Dhaidí,” ar sise. “Tá súil agam gur ith tú na píosáí sicín,” arsa Daidí. Ní raibh focal as Aoibheann. “Bhuf, bhuf,” arsa Glic.

### **Exercise 29. Finding matching words**

Make lists of words that have the same vowel spellings. How are they pronounced? Do they sound alike? If not, is there any pattern to why some pronunciations are different?

#### **Examples:**

aoi: *Aoibheann, cathaoir* (<aoi> pronounced the same in each)

ai: *thosaigh, Daidí, caithfidh, maith, déanfaidh, maitheas*, (when <ai> is in the second syllable, it is unstressed, and therefore different from the stressed <ai>).

*Raibh* is also pronounced differently; this one is entirely irregular.

The rest are pronounced the same.

Other spellings with multiple examples in the story: a, á, i, í, o, éi, éa,

***Alternate instructions:***

1. Group words according to which ones sound (rather than look) alike.
2. Group sequences of more than one vowel according to whether two vowel sounds are heard (*bia, dhiaidh, suas*) or not (*súil, raibh, píosáí, etc.*)
3. Specify a spelling for class to look for. In other texts with more examples, look for examples of the same words with and without mutations, compare pronunciations.

Most of the exercises above could be adapted for use with vocabulary from particular stories.

***Exercise 30. Noticing dialect differences***

Look at the list of proverbs below as shown on:

<http://www.abair.tcd.ie/?page=proverbs&lang=gle>

Say each proverb aloud as you would say it, and underline the word(s) that you expect to be pronounced differently in another dialect.

Then play each one in each of the dialects and listen carefully to notice the differences.

Gaeilge English

Baile Eolas Fúinn Sintéis Áiseanna Teagmháil Rochtain Breiseán NVDA



<< Ar ais

<b>Seanhocal</b>	<b>Gaoth Dobhair</b>	<b>Conamara</b>	<b>Conamara HTS</b>	<b>Mumhain HTS</b>
<b>An rud is annamh is iontach.</b> <i>The rarest thing is the most wonderful.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is fearr stuaim ná neart.</b> <i>Better sense than strength.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Mol an óige agus tíoifaidh sí.</b> <i>Praise youth and it will flourish.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is fearr cara sa chúirt ná punt sa sparán.</b> <i>Better have a friend in court than a pound in your purse.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is maith an t-anlann an t-ocras.</b> <i>Hunger is good sauce.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is éasca caint ná coisíocht.</b> <i>Easier talking than doing.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is fearr a bheith cinnte ná cailte.</b> <i>Better to be sure than to be lost.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is fearr bothán biamhar ná caisleán gortach.</b> <i>A cabin with plenty of food is better than a hungry castle.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>Is fearr amharc amháin romhat ná dhá amharc i do dhiaidh.</b> <i>foresight is better than hindsight.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>
<b>*Sí capall na hoibre an bia.</b> <i>Food is the horse for work.</i>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	<input type="button" value="▶"/>

<http://www.abair.tcd.ie/?page=proverbs&lang=gle>

## Chapter 9 Further reading and Resources

1. The spelling game in Exercise 3 is adapted from *The Best of Myles*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1999. Further examples from the column he wrote as Myles na gCopaleen can be found there.
2. *Our Fada* (Ó Snodaigh & Ó Domhnaill, 2012) provides many more examples of minimal pairs for vowel length (words that differ only by the presence or absence of a *síneadh fada*).
3. *Eolas Fóineolaíochta* (Áisaonad) available from [https://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic\\_na\\_Gaeilge.html](https://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic_na_Gaeilge.html) has exercises to develop awareness of syllables, and phonological awareness of sounds at the beginning, middle and ends of words.
4. Clay (1993) has other suggestions for reading exercises in English that could be adapted for Irish in Clay and Nig Uidhir (2006). Intended for children with reading difficulties in their native language, these exercises also seem appropriate for second language learners with reduced access to the language, such as learners of Irish. Ó Faoláin (2006) describes several Bingo-style computer games devised for phonics lessons in Irish spelling. These could easily be adapted for use with pencil and paper, giving each child a sheet with different combinations of graphemes on a bingo card, and calling out the sounds for them to identify and cross off, until one has completed a line of the card (or the whole card).

# Resources

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## Phonics

An tÁisaonad. **Túsphuimeanna**– downloadable booklets to teach sounds in Irish. Range of materials available for download. <http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/>

BELB (Belfast Education and Library Board)/An tÁisaonad. (2011). *Fónaic na Gaeilge, Eolas Fóineolaíoch Comprehensive Phonics materials* for teachers and pupils, can be downloaded free/Ar fáil ar líne ag: [http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic\\_na\\_Gaeilge.html](http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/Fonaic/Fonaic_na_Gaeilge.html)

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. (2014). *Cód na Gaeilge, Ag Fiosrú Focal*. CCEA agus J. de Brún. New Phonics course that builds on Fónaic na Gaeilge, with teacher materials and workbooks for children aged 2-7. Can be downloaded at/ Ar fáil ar líne ag: <http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/codnagaeilge> Or [http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum/gaeloideachas/eochairch%C3%A9imeanna\\_1\\_2/r%C3%A9ims%C3%AD\\_foghlama/teanga\\_agus\\_litearthacht/c%C3%B3d\\_na](http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum/gaeloideachas/eochairch%C3%A9imeanna_1_2/r%C3%A9ims%C3%AD_foghlama/teanga_agus_litearthacht/c%C3%B3d_na)

Gill Education (2013) *Fonn Fónaice*. Interactive Irish phonics resources on CD-ROM. <http://www.gilleducation.ie/primary-irish/primary-irish/fonn-fnaice-diosca>

Muintearas has also published materials focusing on Irish phonics, available from <http://www.muintearas.com/leabhar.htm> These are divided into 4 levels, some of which include:

- Na gutaí fada agus na consain Céim 2 (1998)
- Na gutaí fada: Leabhar Oibre (2013)
- Na gutaí gearra agus na gutaí gearra le chéile. Céim 4 (2008)
- Na consain agus na gutaí gearra. Céim 4 (2008)

Northern Ireland Curriculum (various support materials for Irish phonics): <http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/>. (Click on Gaeloideachas link)

## Pronunciation guides

**ABAIR - The Irish Language Synthesiser** ([www.abair.ie](http://www.abair.ie)) based in TCD offers synthesised pronunciations for Irish. Abair uses Text-to-Speech (TTS) synthesis to turn written text into speech, making it possible to input text and have it sounded out in Donegal, Connemara and Munster Irish. The website offers Learning resources at <http://www.abair.tcd.ie/?page=learners&lang=eng> where greetings, numbers and proverbs aimed at beginners can be read aloud, as well as short stories and news from resources such as Tuairisc.ie for more advanced learners.

**CabairE** is part of the AB AIR project based in Trinity College Dublin. *CabairE* is a literacy aid for Irish that helps understanding of Irish spelling <http://www.abair.tcd.ie/cabaire/eolas.php?lang=eng> A word or text can be pasted into the *CabairE* textbox, and *CabairE* will read it out in Irish in whichever

dialect (Donegal, Connemara or Kerry Irish) chosen, highlighting each word and sentence and word as it reads aloud. along. This helps pupils and beginner learners to follow the text word by word as they hear it, with the aim of improving their understanding of the relation between spelling and pronunciation. Any text can be entered or pasted in, and the text colour and size can be changed. *CabairE* also features a variety of fonts including dyslexic fonts. *CabairE* is funded by *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG).

**Teanglann - Phonetic database for Irish (Bunachar Foghraíochta) [www.teanglann.ie](http://www.teanglann.ie)**

This website offers online dictionaries: English-Irish (de Bhaldraithe, 1959) and Irish-English (Ó Dónaill, 1977), and any word selected can be sounded out in each of the 3 dialects, by real (not synthesized) voices.

**Foclóir Póca Pronunciation Guide <http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/about/an-gum/focloir-poca/?lang=en>**

In the Irish-English section of the *Foclóir Póca* dictionary each headword is accompanied by a phonetic description and a guide to the pronunciation of all the basic sounds of Irish is provided in a booklet that can be downloaded on this website. The first three chapters of the Pronunciation Guide booklet contain examples, while chapter four shows how Irish words are stressed. The system of pronunciation is based on the Lárchanúint, rather than any one dialect, aiming to contain a core common to them all. The website includes mp3 files giving Irish examples spoken by a native speaker, one from each of the three main dialects. Each speaker shows how the core dialect can be accommodated while using his or her own dialect as a basic reference.

**Fuaimeanna: *Fuaimeanna na Gaeilge*.** Brian Ó Raghallaigh Cois Life (2013). A beginner's course in phonetics and phonology <http://www.fuaimeanna.ie> The website that accompanies the book has sound files to support readers with recordings of the vowels and consonants referred to in the book from each of three dialects: the Irish of **Gaoth Dobhair**, the Irish of **An Cheathrú Rua** and the Irish of **Corca Dhuibhne** <http://www.fuaimeanna.ie/en/Sounds.aspx>

**Teagasc na Gaeilge** makes available the current third level syllabus for Irish teacher education, and includes a variety of sample materials and resources for teachers: <http://www.teagascnagaeilge.ie>

## Selected reading materials and other resources

*An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG) <http://www.cogg.ie> publishes, and publicises in its various resource booklets, a wide range of audio, video, print and on-line interactive teaching resources for Irish, including an extensive collection of reading materials (including some specifically targeting spelling). COGG offers downloadable Resources Guides listing materials in Irish for different age-groups <http://www.cogg.ie/en/resource-directory/> There are also downloadable posters for the classroom, some teacher-prepared materials, powerpoint presentations on aspects of teaching, and more.

*An Gum* <http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/fuinn/an-gum/> This website details Irish schoolbooks and teaching resources for both the primary and secondary sector; literature for children and young adults; novels and reference works for the general public plus a growing range of e-books.

**An tÁisaonad** Range of reading materials available for download. <http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/aisaonad/> Downloadable resources for pre-reading and early reading instruction in Irish. Pre-reading materials at 3 levels (Cleite), Céim ar Chéim and other literacy materials.

**Edcite as Gaeilge** offers resources in Irish for teachers, funded by COGG and An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreacht, Gnóthaí Réigiúnacha, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta. <http://www.abair.tcd.ie/cabaire/cluichi.php>

**E-leathanach: Electronic newsletter** aimed at 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class primary. <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/froebel-department-primary-and-early-childhood-education/leathanach> Send e-mail to [leathanach@gmail.com](mailto:leathanach@gmail.com) to receive weekly selections.

**Leighleat** (online books in Irish). Website by teachers offering digital resources in Irish (stories, poems) to support teachers and parents in using more Irish at home <http://www.leighleat.com>

**Raidió na Life Closleabhair:** <https://soundcloud.com/rnl/sets/leabhar-do-phaist> A collection of over 50 children's books recorded by Raidió na Life and made available free as podcasts to help young readers and their parents.

**Subh.ie:** <http://subh.ie> (videos, computer games, flashcards and other teaching and learning resources).

**Séideán Sí**, an integrated programme for teaching Irish in Gaeltacht and all-Irish Primary schools, published by An Gúm and the Department of Education, includes readers, workbooks, teacher's manuals, posters, games, CDs as well as interactive support materials available on line at <http://www.seideansi.ie>.

**Drochlá Ruairí** (Colmán Ó Raghallaigh, Cló Mhaigh Eo) is an excellent storybook, available in all three major dialects with accompanying materials available on CD Rom from Fios Feasa.



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