1 The context: Large-scale immigration to Ireland from the mid-1990s and its impact on primary schools

From the late 1990s into the 2000s Ireland experienced a sustained wave of immigration that transformed the country's demographic profile. The population grew by 8% between 1996 and 2002, by 8.2% between 2002 and 2006, and – despite the country's economic decline, which began in 2008 – by 8.2% between 2006 and 2011 (Central Statistics Office 2012:9). In 2002, non-Irish EU residents totalled 133,436; by 2006 this figure had risen to 275,775, which included 120,534 citizens of states that acceded to the EU in 2004 – the largest groups came from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia (Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity and Byrne 2009:4). In the four years to April 2006, total net migration was 192,000, whereas in the five years to April 2011 it dropped to 125,000 (Central Statistics Office 2012:10). This latter figure reflects the impact of the economic crisis, but it is nevertheless significant for a country with a total population of just over four and a half million. In their Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–15, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Office of the Minister for Integration noted that 'the recent profile of migrants is changing, with an increasing proportion in the 0–15 year old age category', acknowledging that 'immigrants will remain a definite feature of Irish society and education into the future' (Department of Education and Skills and Office of the Minister for Integration 2010:5).

These changes in Ireland's demographic profile have had a major impact on the education sector. Many schools have enrolled children and adolescents from immigrant backgrounds for the first time, and many of those children and adolescents have home languages other than English or Irish. While the highest numbers of immigrants are concentrated in urban areas, especially parts of greater Dublin, where in some schools more than 50% of the pupils come from immigrant backgrounds (McGorman and Sugrue 2007:51), the enrolment of non-English/Irish-speaking pupils has also extended unpredictably to small schools in rural areas. The Irish education system has thus been confronted with the challenge of enabling pupils from immigrant backgrounds to integrate socially and achieve their full academic potential. An essential part of this response is to ensure that all such pupils can access and develop fluency in the language of education, which in most primary schools in Ireland is English.

To begin with, the official designation for children and adolescents from immigrant backgrounds was 'non-national', but this was gradually replaced by 'newcomer'. Both terms are unsatisfactory, however, because they evidently exclude the significant numbers of children born in Ireland to immigrant parents. Such children are Irish nationals and certainly not 'newcomers', but they may grow up with a home language other than Irish or English. 'Non-English-speaking' was avoided by officialdom lest it be wrongly applied to children who spoke only Irish when they started school. More recently the term 'English as an additional language' has gained currency, and throughout this book we refer to EAL pupils (primary) and students (post-primary).

The official policy response: Provision of two years of English language support for each EAL pupil-student

In the late 1990s the DES introduced measures to support the integration of immigrant pupils in primary and immigrant students in post-primary schools. Pupils and students are assigned to a mainstream class on the basis of their age, but they are provided with two years of specially funded English language support. Schools are free to organise this support in whatever way they wish, though there is a general expectation that it will be delivered to small groups of pupils separately from their mainstream class. In practice, most primary schools provide EAL pupils with one English language lesson a day, of between 35 and 45 minutes, organised to harmonise thematically with whatever part of the primary curriculum is in focus in the pupils' mainstream class. This means that most immigrant pupils spend at least 80% of their time in an immersion situation without special English language assistance.

In 2007 a ministerial decision allowed English language support to continue beyond the two-year limit in the case of pupils who after two years were still not ready for full integration in the mainstream. In 2009, however, deteriorating economic circumstances caused the two-year limit on English language support to be reimposed, and extended language support was allowed only in the most strenuously appealed cases. Subsequent cuts in public spending have led to a significant reduction in the number of English language support teachers and thus in the amount of English language teaching that schools are able to provide.

The pedagogical response

The role of Integrate Ireland Language and Training

When the DES introduced the policy of two years' English language support for all EAL pupils and students, it allocated funding to allow schools to provide additional teaching but took no further measures. The official line seemed to be that as fully trained professionals, teachers should know how to deal with the situation. This was, however, unrealistic. Although primary teachers in Ireland are required to teach Irish, which is a compulsory subject from the beginning to the end of schooling, they are not trained specifically as language teachers; and post-primary teachers whose subject is not Irish or a foreign language can be guided only by memories of the language teaching they themselves received at school. Not surprisingly, the DES came under pressure from the teachers' unions and various professional bodies to do more to facilitate the provision of English language support. It turned to the Refugee Language Support Unit (RLSU) for help.

The DES had established the RLSU in March 1999 as a two-year pilot project under the aegis of the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College Dublin. The RLSU's primary function was to co-ordinate the provision of intensive English language programmes for adult refugees admitted to Ireland. In September 2001, the RLSU became Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin that was wholly funded by the Irish government until funding was withdrawn in the summer of 2008. In the summer of 2000 the DES had already extended the RLSU's function to include the provision of various kinds of support for primary and post-primary schools. The terms of reference laid down by the DES were as follows:

1. To analyse the linguistic demands of the primary and post-primary curricula and identify the language needed by non-English-speaking 'non-national' pupils in order to participate fully in the educational process.
2. To develop materials designed to support the teaching and learning of EAL in primary and post-primary schools.
3. To mediate materials, teaching approaches and supplementary aids to English language support teachers via an ongoing in-service training programme.

Work undertaken in fulfilment of the first of these terms of reference yielded two sets of *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks*, one for primary pupils and one for post-primary students. Chapter 2 explains in some detail how the primary *Benchmarks* were developed. The first versions of the *Benchmarks* were published in 2000 and substantially revised in 2003

(Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2003a, 2003b); the present study refers to the revised versions.

In fulfilment of the second term of reference, IILT developed versions of the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP) for primary and post-primary learners of EAL. These were validated and accredited by the ELP Validation Committee in 2001, revised to bring them into line with the revised *Benchmarks*, and re-accredited in 2004 – accreditation nos. 11.2001 rev. 2004 (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2004a) and 12.2001 rev. 2004 (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2004b). The ELP has three obligatory components: a language passport that summarises the owner's language profile and experience of learning and using second languages; a language biography that supports goal setting and self-assessment and encourages learners to reflect on different dimensions of the language learning process; and a dossier in which learners collect work in progress and/or samples of work that support their self-assessment. In the ELP for primary learners of EAL, goal setting and teacher-supported self-assessment are based on checklists of 'I can' descriptors derived from the Can Do descriptors of the *Benchmarks* and arranged according to 13 recurrent curriculum themes called 'units of work'. Altogether 211 descriptors capture the gradually developing repertoire that EAL pupils need to acquire in order to participate in mainstream education. Whereas the dossier in most ELPs is empty, providing instructions for use and perhaps a blank table of contents, in the model for EAL pupils it includes various worksheets designed to link the themes of the checklists to classroom activities. This ELP is available from the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie/iilt); for more general information on the ELP, go to the Council of Europe's ELP website (www.coe.int/portfolio).

Besides supporting the development of the individual pupil's proficiency in English, the primary ELP provided teachers, school principals, inspectors and parents with a dynamic record of progress. It also coincided with key principles that underpin the Irish primary curriculum: learning how to learn; accommodating individual difference; basing learning on what is already known and on the immediate social and educational environment; integrating the development of new knowledge and skills; and, by making learners active agents in their learning, fostering the development of the individual learner's full potential. The primary ELP is also designed to validate pupils' home languages. Both the language passport and the language biography contain pages that focus on languages that the pupil knows in addition to English as the language of schooling, and teachers were encouraged to get parents to translate key headings into their home language.

Between 2000 and 2006 IILT developed a range of materials that support the action-oriented, communicative approach to language teaching and

learning derived from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) and implied by the *Benchmarks*. In 2006 these were brought together in a single publication, *Up and Away* (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2006b). All materials remain freely available online.

In fulfilment of the third term of reference IILT organised a series of twice-yearly in-service seminars for English language support teachers. Post-primary English language support was usually provided by teachers with spare capacity. This tended to result in haphazard provision (Lyons and Little 2009); it also meant that few English language support teachers could be spared to attend in-service seminars. For this reason each post-primary seminar was given just once, in Dublin, and attended by an average of 70 English language support teachers. There were more EAL pupils at primary level than EAL students at post-primary level, and thus more English language support teachers. At primary level, moreover, English language support funding was used to create additional teaching posts. This meant that schools could assign teachers to specialise in English language support, which made it easier for them to attend in-service seminars since the only consequence of their absence from school was a one-day suspension of English language classes. Thus from an early stage, significantly more primary than post-primary English language support teachers attended in-service seminars, which made it necessary to hold seminars in different centres around the country. In the autumn term of 2005, for example, seven seminars were held (four in Dublin and one each in Dundalk, Mallow and Galway), with a total attendance of 548 teachers from 411 schools (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2006a). IILT used the seminars to disseminate the *Benchmarks*, the ELP and other teaching materials, but also to give teachers an opportunity to discuss the challenges they faced in common and to share experiences, methods and materials. IILT also depended on the seminars to provide critical feedback on its materials; the revision of the *Benchmarks*, for example, was informed by detailed discussions with teachers at in-service seminars.

From a very early stage, teachers attending in-service seminars began to ask for instruments that would enable them to gauge newly arrived pupils' proficiency in English (if any) and assess their progress through the two years of English language support. IILT responded by developing and piloting simple communicative tests of listening, speaking, reading and writing, between 2003 and 2006. As far as possible, assessment tasks were communicative activities typical of primary classrooms: in effect, realisations of *Benchmarks* descriptors. For speaking and writing, rating scales and scoring grids were designed on the basis of *Benchmarks* descriptors of underlying linguistic competence (for further discussion, see Chapter 2). Each suite of tests was introduced at in-service seminars and teachers were recruited to pilot

them and provide critical feedback to inform the revision of the tests.[1] In 2007 the assessment kit was published by the DES and copies were distributed to every primary school in the country (Little, Lazenby Simpson and Finnegan Ćatibušić 2007). The DES intended that arguments for additional English language support should be based on a pupil's performance on the tests. The validity and reliability of this procedure were undermined, however, when, following the closure of IILT in 2008, the DES made the assessment kit freely available online as the least expensive way of responding to the demand for more copies.

Three research questions

By 2006 IILT had fulfilled the terms of reference that it was given in 2000. The *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* were widely accepted as a map of the ground that English language support pupils had to cover in order to gain full access to mainstream education; a majority of schools were using the ELP as a key teaching and learning tool;[2] and a new impetus was given to IILT's teaching and learning supports when they were brought together in a single publication, *Up and Away* (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2006b), which the DES distributed free of charge to all primary schools in the state. A great deal had been achieved in a relatively short period; it was now time to undertake the empirical research whose results are reported in this book.

The research sought to answer three questions:

1. *To what extent does the development of EAL pupils' L2 communicative proficiency – their capacity to participate in classroom discourse – correspond to the trajectory hypothesised in the* English Language Proficiency Benchmarks?
   From the beginning teachers welcomed the *Benchmarks*, which they could use to plan their teaching and gauge the progress of their pupils. At a functional level the progression implied by the *Benchmarks* is perhaps a matter of common sense, but it lacked empirical support. Also, the thematic scope of the *Benchmarks*, intended to reflect the

[1] In the autumn of 2004 tests of speaking and writing were sent to 50 teachers in 41 primary schools around the country; 287 language support pupils were assessed, and 252 rated recordings of the speaking tests and 186 rated writing tests were returned to IILT. In the spring of 2005 tests of reading were sent to 56 teachers in 48 primary schools; 266 language support pupils were assessed and 52 assessment packs were returned. And in the autumn of 2005 listening tests were sent to 49 teachers in 39 primary schools; 311 language support pupils were assessed and 45 assessment packs were returned.

[2] In each of IILT's last two years of operation it sold some 5,000 copies of the primary ELP. Given that language support is provided for two years and at that time there were estimated to be some 12,000 EAL pupils attending primary schools, these sales figures imply a take-up rate in the region of 80%.

thematic scope of the primary curriculum, was based on consultation with teachers' focus groups and reflected their understanding of the primary curriculum, but we had no confirmation that this scope was adequate to the daily reality of English language support.

2. *How do individual pupils develop underlying L2 linguistic competence – the linguistic resources on which their capacity to communicate depends – and to what degree is this development marked by back-sliding, variance, etc.?*
   Although it seemed unlikely that pupils would be able to perform, for example, A2 level speaking tasks before first developing the capacity to perform A1 tasks, we had no information concerning the development of the linguistic competence that underpins learners' functional capacity.
3. *What does analysis of data obtained from a group of pupils allow us to say about the overall relation between L2 communicative capacity and underlying linguistic competence?*
   Progress in the provision of English language support clearly depends, among other things, on knowing a great deal more about this relation, not just in individual case studies but in the immigrant population as a whole.

In Chapter 2 we explain why and how the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks for Non-English-speaking Pupils at Primary Level* (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2003a) were developed, describe their structure, summarise their content, and show how they are related to the CEFR.

2 The English Language Proficiency Benchmarks

In Chapter 1 we briefly introduced the challenge that large-scale immigration poses to Ireland's schools, explained the official policy response (two years of focused English language support for each EAL pupil or student), and described the various actions undertaken by IILT in support of that policy. Those actions were essentially of three kinds: the development of the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* that provide a map of the journey EAL students must make from zero proficiency in the language of schooling to the ability to participate with a degree of independence in mainstream classroom activities; a version of the ELP and various other teaching/learning materials; and a suite of simple communicative tests that schools could use to assess the English language proficiency of EAL pupils/students and the extent of their progress at the end of their first and second years of English language support. *Benchmarks*, pedagogical materials, and successive components of the assessment kit were introduced to teachers via a programme of in-service seminars, which ensured that their ongoing development was informed by interaction with classroom reality.

In this chapter we introduce the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* for EAL pupils at primary level, which provided the focus for the empirical research reported in this book. We begin by briefly explaining why the *Benchmarks* were developed, what we hoped they would achieve, and why we modelled them on the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). Next we consider the CEFR's action-oriented approach to the description of language proficiency and its pedagogical implications. After that we describe the sources of information on which we drew in order to develop the *Benchmarks* and the design considerations that determined their content and structure. Finally we present samples of the *Benchmarks* themselves, and conclude the chapter by briefly restating the three focuses of our research.

Why English Language Proficiency Benchmarks?

The first reason for developing the *Benchmarks* was that the DES asked for them. DES officials who visited Canada to find out how that country manages the linguistic integration of immigrants had been introduced to the *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (www.language.ca). These are

designed with the language needs of adult immigrants in mind; they seek to capture the skills that immigrants must develop in English or French in order to perform effectively in the workplace. What the DES seemed to have in mind when it commissioned IILT to develop the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* was a series of thresholds that EAL pupils and students must cross in order gradually to become fully integrated in mainstream education.

In response to this requirement, we set out to develop instruments that would be at once simpler and more complex than the *Canadian Language Benchmarks*: simpler in the sense that they would be relatively short and easy for teachers to use on a daily basis; more complex in the sense that they would describe progression in learning, thus providing teachers with a 'map' of the ground to be covered by their EAL pupils and students. From the beginning we were clear that what was needed was not a separate EAL curriculum, but some sort of prism through which English language support teachers could view the different components of the mainstream curriculum and the linguistic demands that they imposed on EAL pupils and students.

The metaphor of a map is a way of acknowledging that the *Benchmarks* would not perform their intended function if they simply provided a more or less detailed description of the repertoire that EAL pupils should possess after two years of English language support. Only if we identified stages in the development of that repertoire could we expect the *Benchmarks* to exert a direct influence on EAL teaching. A staged description of EAL pupils' functional development would, we believed, help teachers to select appropriate learning activities and materials; it would also provide them with a simple metric against which they could gauge their pupils' progress.

The CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) offered itself as an obvious source and model, for three reasons. First, it has a clearly articulated system of proficiency levels whose components are described in great though non-language-specific detail; secondly, its action-oriented ('Can Do') approach to the description of proficiency encourages teachers to focus on communicative outcomes, which we believed was imperative in the case of immigrant pupils and students; and thirdly, the fact that each 'Can Do' descriptor can simultaneously specify a curriculum goal, imply a learning activity, and invite the definition of assessment criteria emphasises the close relation between curriculum pedagogy and assessment. This last consideration implies an assessment culture in which learner self-assessment is an important part of formative assessment, which in turn is guided by the same criteria that shape summative assessment (see Little 2006, 2009, 2011 for further discussion). Such an assessment culture was already on the educational agenda in Ireland at the end of the 1990s, thanks in part to the introduction of a new primary curriculum in 1999 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 1999).

The CEFR's description of second language proficiency

Scales and levels

The CEFR describes language learning targets and outcomes in terms of language use, which it divides into four kinds: reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation (translating and interpreting). For the activities of listening and reading, spoken and written interaction, and oral and written production it provides illustrative scales comprising six levels of proficiency arranged in three bands: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user). These bands are roughly equivalent to the traditional categories of beginner, intermediate and advanced, which no doubt helps to explain the speed with which they have been adopted internationally. The CEFR's illustrative scales focus on different dimensions of each activity. For example, there are nine scales for spoken interaction: overall spoken interaction; understanding a native speaker interlocutor; conversation; informal discussion (with friends); formal discussion and meetings; goal-oriented cooperation; transactions to obtain goods and services; information exchange; and interviewing and being interviewed. The illustrative scales lie behind the 'global scale' (Council of Europe 2001:24), which gives a holistic summary of each of the six levels; they also lie behind the 'self-assessment grid' (Council of Europe 2001:26–27), which gives a summary descriptor of proficiency at each of the six levels for five communicative activities: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing (see Appendix 1). The two-dimensional character of the self-assessment grid (communicative activities on the vertical axis, proficiency levels on the horizontal) reminds us of the often uneven nature of L2 proficiency development: receptive skills ahead of productive skills, reading more advanced than listening, spoken interaction better developed than writing, and so on.

Two complementary dimensions of the CEFR's descriptive apparatus

The CEFR's 'Can Do' approach to the description of communicative proficiency has two complementary dimensions: communicative activities and the competences on which we draw when we engage in those activities. Chapter 4 of the CEFR is concerned with communicative activities. Altogether it provides 40 illustrative scales: five for spoken production, three for written production, five for listening, five for reading, one for audio-visual reception, nine for spoken interaction, three for written interaction, three for production strategies, one for reception strategies, three for spoken interaction