New Possibilities in the Teaching and Learning of the Copula in Irish.

Steven O' Connor

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work.

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Abstract

This dissertation is a pragmatic mediation between pedagogical theory and its actualisation in the social reality of the classroom. It owes its origins to a learning difficulty that is all too regularly observed by teachers of Irish. The difficulty in question is the ability to use and form the copula verb. While conscious of the various external factors that militate against the acquisition of Irish, it is argued that persistently high levels of public dissatisfaction with the quality of instruction in Irish cannot be dismissed without any further ado. It is posited that much of this unhappiness stems from a failure to successfully embed grammar in communicative activities and thereby producing learners with reasonable levels of oral and written proficiency yet with little mastery of form. In this case, many learners today are able to access the meaning of the copula but regularly fail to form it accurately. Given the linguistic situation in Ireland where the classroom is the only context of learning for many learners of Irish, the author claims that learners have little hope of functioning independently outside the education system if left bereft of an explicit grammatical knowledge of the language. Without compromising the main tenets of the communicative approach to language learning, a focus on form (FonF) offers itself as a promising pedagogical procedure in which grammatical salience can still be achieved in activities where the primary emphasis is on the production of meaning. These and other recent findings from the field of Second Language Acquisition research form the theoretical basis for a series of tasks designed to help early learners correctly use and form the copula. In setting out to document the extent of the learning difficulty, a written pre-test was taken by three classes in a secondary school in February 2002. One of these classes was subsequently chosen for a week's instruction so that these tasks could be operationalised and evaluated. The data used to analyse learners' development in their ability to correctly use and form the copula was collected via immediate and delayed post-tests. The results obtained are promising and augur well for the incorporation of FonF tasks into Irish language classrooms. Such tasks possess the potential to satisfy the difficult learning situation in which learners of Irish find themselves. Prior to any possible introduction into communicative syllabi, however, FonF needs to demonstrate its effectiveness on a far broader and more comprehensive basis.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The obituary of the Irish language has been written so often over the years that the latest harbinger of doom and gloom-the *2002 Gaeltacht Commission Report*-has been largely ignored by the Irish public. The deeply disturbing figures contained in the report confirm a further decline in the number of daily speakers of Irish in Gaeltacht areas. More startling is the finding (p.37) that of the one hundred and fifty four local electoral districts in the various Gaeltachtaí, only eighteen were returned as areas where Irish was spoken by over seventy percent of the local community. While such matters are not the immediate concern of the thousands of Irish language teachers throughout the country, it is foolhardy to suggest that such a continuous erosion of the language as a vernacular does not impact upon our class work. Indeed where the state's promotion of bilingualism outside the school can only be described as dismal, such a report increases the pressure upon the education system "to 'produce' new generations of competent bilinguals to offset the frequent failure of natural transmission" (Harris 1991, p.88). Such expectations are surreal and the disappointment that follows is inescapable. In the absence of an informed, honest and nationwide debate, however, this disappointment will only deepen. The following explains why.

It is perhaps a disturbing indicator of the importance the Irish public attributes to the quality of its education system that a report in the *Irish Times* (20 June 2002) which quoted a figure of over one thousand unqualified primary teachers currently teaching in

the nation's schools along with eight hundred untrained substitutes raised barely an eyebrow. John Carr, current general secretary of the INTO (Irish National Teachers' Organisation), identifies poor planning by the Department of Education as the reason for the crisis. He states: "Despite recent increases in places in the Colleges of Education, teacher supply will fall far short of meeting the needs of schools" (ibid.). The sad truth is that many of these extra college places are allocated under the guise of consecutive post-graduate courses, programmes of eighteen months duration that were re-introduced in 1995 after a period of twelve years as the sheer scale of teacher shortages became glaringly apparent. Where thousands of learners have been educated by unqualified personnel, as appears to have been the case throughout the nineties, the consequences are unlikely to be positive. More specifically, while the resultant standard of instruction in Irish may not be the most pressing concern for parents, one dreads to think what learners have had to endure as they grappled side by side with their 'teacher' in the learning of this new tongue. Ultimately, the aforementioned teacher shortages are a telling indictment of government policy over the past two decades. Professor John Coolahan, speaking in 1990 at the opening of a conference concerned with building a new coherence towards teacher education in Europe, had the following to say: "The lesson must be conclusively learned that there is no future in trying to prepare teachers on the cheap for a high demand, low regard career" (Coolahan 1990, p.7). Twelve years on, and as thousands of children receive the fruits of unqualified instruction; the government has clearly not taken this truism sufficiently on board.

With respect to Irish however, there is clear evidence that quality of instruction may still not be readily guaranteed despite teachers having obtained the requisite accreditation. In the Report of the Working Group on Primary Pre-service Teacher Education (2001) entitled "*Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century*", a full chapter is devoted to the training provided to trainee teachers so that they can teach Irish through the medium of Irish. The group, having consulted with all five of the Colleges of Education, paint a refreshingly honest yet depressing picture:

> Dealraíonn áfach, nach bhfuil na coláistí sásta i láthair na huaire le caighdeán na Gaeilge i measc mhac léinn ar theacht go dti an coláiste dóibh, agus nach bhfuil na scoileanna ná an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta sásta le caighdeán na mac léinn nuair a fhágann siad an coláiste (ibid., p. 87).
>
> (It appears however, that the training colleges are not satisfied with the present standard of Irish among college entrants and that neither the schools nor the Department of Education and Science are satisfied with the standard of Irish amongst students as they leave the training colleges. [my translation])

Such concerns are clearly not shared by the same trainee teachers themselves. The report notes that 83.7% of the students surveyed in the two larger training colleges, Mary Immaculate College in Limerick and St. Patrick's Educational College in Drumcondra, Dublin, believed that they were capable of teaching Irish. At the same time, 41.8% of

graduates from the same institutions expressed the view that their standard of Irish had not actually improved during their time there. Nevertheless, as the report rightly points out, it is far from surprising that certain teachers have difficulty in teaching Irish when it is currently possible for a teacher to be awarded his/her teaching qualification despite having failed the Irish language methodology section in the terminal examination. At the secondary level, there is a growing sense of urgency regarding the quality of instruction in Irish. On the launch of the ASTI's (Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland) discussion paper on Irish on 14 March 2002, the union's president, Ms. Catherine Fitzpatrick, captured the seriousness of the current situation with the observation that "the teaching and learning of Irish at second level is in need of a radical overhaul." For a profession to have credibility, it must be able to perform the duties laid upon it. While not the main concern of this dissertation, no curriculum, irrespective of how realistically it is conceived, can entertain any hopes of realisation in the absence of a linguistically capable and sufficient cohort of practitioners.

While acknowledging the fundamental ailments that beset the quality of Irish language instruction, I will argue that this does not release current practitioners from endeavouring to overcome certain pedagogical problems within the confines of the class. Our role as *teachers* is to maximise the amount of learning that takes place during our period of contact with our learners. To optimally fulfil this task, we must have a theoretical understanding of what occurs in the language learning process that will underpin and guide our choice of methodologies as we expose learners to the target language. The worldwide research into the process of second language acquisition has provided a wealth of specifications, which teachers continue to validate in their classrooms. These findings have equipped designers of methodologies and teaching materials with a theoretical resource, which they may draw upon to inform their work. In this dissertation, I will show that SLA research has already much to offer Irish teachers and how many areas of Irish instruction, with additional research and empirical validation, could be significantly enhanced. In particular, I will focus on how classroom tasks, grounded in current SLA findings, may facilitate the appropriation of one of the more difficult aspects of Irish grammar, namely the copula verb.

Chapter One begins by providing a socio-educational perspective in which all issues regarding the learning and teaching of Irish need to be viewed. An overview of the various functions of the copula then follows. The chapter concludes with an initial investigation outlining the extent to which learners are currently struggling with this aspect of Irish Grammar. In searching for possible solutions, Chapter Two sets out by examining the potential root causes of this learning difficulty among learners at secondary level. I proceed to consider current findings in SLA research which need to inform any measures undertaken in facilitating the acquisition of the copula. In order that both its form and function be mastered, I will aim to identify methodologies that allow for grammar to be successfully embedded in a communicative classroom. Chapter Three describes the tasks designed to embody these pedagogical principles and provides a review of the pre-test results obtained from tests conducted in a secondary school during February 2002. Finally, the reliability and validity of these tests are discussed. Following a teaching week in which these newly designed tasks were tried out, Chapter Four begins

with some reflections from both teacher and learners on the tasks and concludes with an analysis of the promising results obtained from a post-test and a delayed post-test. In conclusion, I recognise that these tasks, employed to aid the learner in acquiring the copula, do not constitute some universal recipe. They represent rather a pragmatic mediation towards research entailing the relating of abstraction to actuality and the use of technique to realise principles (Widdowson, 1990). Before such principles can be safely realised, however, parameters regarding the future design of such tasks need to be set. To that end, the wider input and co-operation of all interested parties is called for.

Chapter One: Setting the Scene

1.1 Introduction

Set against a background of recent evidence regarding the performance of learners in Irish at the secondary level, this chapter proceeds to provide an explanatory context in which any issue regarding the learning and teaching of Irish needs to be viewed. The current panoply of public attitudes to the Irish language and its importance within the education system is considered. An analysis of the misunderstood role of grammar in successive teaching methodologies then follows. I continue with an overview of one of the more conceptually difficult grammatical aspects of Irish, i.e. the copula, and offer an initial reasoning as to why it proves so troublesome for learners. Finally, I conclude with a brief description of research undertaken to document the extent of this problem.

1.2 Available Evidence

The most useful recent analysis of data concerning the performance of learners of Irish comes from the Chief Examiners' report on the 2000 Junior Certificate examination papers at higher, ordinary and foundation level. General satisfaction was expressed with student performance at the higher level. Also, the exam provided a good test for the learners in that they had ample scope to display their proficiency. The performance of students at the ordinary level reflected a continuing decline in standards. Between 1997 and 2000, more than 10% of candidates failed to achieve a Grade D or higher – an average of 3,821 per year. Along with a fall of 11.5% in the number of candidates achieving an A or B, concern was also voiced at the "titim shuntasach" or "significant fall" of those attaining a C+ grade dropping from 67.5% in 1997 to 57.4% in 2000. The significant improvement in candidates taking the foundation level needs to be seen in the context of a calamitous drop in standards where a failure rate of 4% in 1992 (the first year a paper was offered at this level) had risen to 12.4% in 1999. Finally, the combined total (i.e. male and female) for candidates taking the higher-level paper in 2000 was 22,794 while an aggregate of 34,266 candidates attempted the ordinary and foundation level papers (Department of Education and Science, Statistical Report 2000, pp.92-97). While the argument could be advanced that there are more young people than ever emerging with accreditation in Irish, the current education system "is producing larger numbers of graduates with high qualifications in Irish, but it is realising the potential of a smaller proportion of candidates than in former years" (Ó Riagáin 2000, p.97). This satisfaction with learners' performance at the higher level is therefore tempered by the

fact that such learners are now in the minority. The results for this year's higher-level paper in the Leaving Certificate are, however, both heartening and perplexing. As reported in the *Irish Times* on 15 August last, Irish provided the highest percentage, among all the examinable subjects, of learners gaining an honours grade. Many of these learners would have been the same learners who sat the Junior Certificate paper in 2000. Further research is required to ascertain whether these highly impressive figures are the fruits of improved teaching and learning, fairer assessment procedures, or a calculated response to a growing trend among some of the elite elements in Irish society "where the educational decisions taken by students and families involve the adoption of a strategy which increasingly does not include higher level Irish or any Irish at all" (Ó Riagáin 2000, p.206).

1.3 General Attitudes

Since the first sociological survey of language attitudes was carried out in 1973 and subsequently repeated in 1983 and 1993, the Irish public have revealed a peculiar plurality of attitudinal dispositions regarding Irish generally and the role of the language in the education system, in particular. Figures quoted in this section are taken from the most recent of these surveys that was carried out by Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin in 1993. Firstly, around 70% of those surveyed opined that the most suitable programme for most learners in primary and secondary level was one in which Irish was taught as a subject. Secondly, at least 66% of respondents in the survey believe that Irish is not being taught well in schools. Thirdly, between 50% and 66% agree that the majority of children resent having to learn Irish and finally, the number of people who said that they would be 'sorry' if most children stopped learning Irish at school rose from 66% in 1983 to 75% in 1993.

How should these figures be interpreted? It is odd that some parents in 1993 would believe in the teaching of Irish, would lament its removal from the curriculum, and at the same time, acknowledge it as something that their children resent doing. Indeed, some of these parents could well have been at a school-going age in 1973 when the first of these surveys was undertaken. Why would you wish for your child to continue doing something that you yourself could well have disliked when you attended school? What is it with adulthood/parenting that engenders in former school-goers a revaluation of the beneficial aspects of learning Irish, particularly when a substantial majority of respondents (70-80% in the 1993 survey) "do not use Irish themselves, even at minimal levels; do not interact with people who speak Irish in their presence; and do not attend social events where any Irish is used" (Ó Gliasáin & Ó Riagáin 1994, p.42). What was it in their formal learning of Irish that they would not wish to deprive their children of? In the absence of further research, conjecture may be our only recourse. I suspect that what these figures indicate is an overall satisfaction with the level of state provision for the language and a refusal by the general public and the state to shoulder the burden of language revival. As a balm to a sense of collective guilt, they gladly bequeath the well-being of Irish to their offspring and the education system, bury their heads in the sand and hope that, within two decades, this changing of the guard will actually work. Any criticism of the actual teaching of Irish needs to be seen in this context. Nevertheless, a

consistent dissatisfaction rating of 66% in the three surveys undertaken since 1973 warrants consideration and cannot be dismissed without further ado. As teachers, we need to establish why our pedagogical practices are so poorly received and to accept perhaps, that it may not all be attributable to external societal factors. In the next section, I will outline my belief that this unhappiness with the teaching of the language has its roots in an unbalanced approach to the teaching of Irish grammar in the classroom.

1.4 The Negative Connotation of Grammar in the Irish Classroom

Whatever its factual nature, Irish grammar has a distinctly negative connotation among both the current and past generations of the Irish school-going public. For thousands of people, it was and remains the optimum in opacity. Significantly, however, this same negative intergenerational outcome is partly due to a slavish adherence to two diametrically opposed classroom methodologies and an underlying misunderstanding of what the true role of grammar in language is. There have been calls recently for the eschewing of certain grammatical forms in Irish in light of the difficulties they cause learners (Ó Ruairc, 1999, 2001) and yet such a move fails to recognise that the problems which lie at the heart of the Irish language classroom are those of instruction and learning and are not due to any inherent linguistic monstrosity. As a teacher, I have often heard parents comment, undoubtedly due to their own educational experience, that Irish would be great without the grammar. Ó hÚrdail has also encountered such a remark and responds that "so would swimming, I suppose, but for all the water" (1995, p.78). Over the past four decades, learners of Irish have been victims of vacillating approaches to pedagogy. The restrictive manner in which grammar was approached ensured that high levels of acquisition would remain the preserve of the minority. The first approach, namely the Grammar-Translation method, denied "the nature of grammar as a construct for the mediation of meaning in teaching which gives primacy to the form and uses words simply as a means of exemplification" (Widdowson 1988, p.62). The second approach saw teachers putting their faith in sufficient input exposure in the hope that they would somehow implicitly induce the rules governing the grammatical structure in question. While comfortable within certain everyday functional contexts, learners are distinctly insecure when forced to confront the unfamiliar through not having sufficient conscious knowledge of the language. Therefore, in effect, the Irish classroom has produced two distinctly different types of learner, each of them possessing what the other lacks.

It is undeniable that certain aspects of Irish grammar do pose considerable conceptual and productive difficulties for learners. A verb-subject-object syntactic pattern, prepositional pronouns, high levels of verbal, nominal and prepositional inflection, complex counting rules and five nominal declensions are significant barriers that learners must overcome. This dissertation seeks to consider another of these conceptual barriers in Irish: the copula, one of the two verbs in the language that discharge the functions of their English equivalent, the verb 'to be'. In the case of the copula, the Grammar-Translation method gave learners a mastery of the form and the abstract structure with little opportunity to appreciate its communicative value whereas students in the communicative class, up to this very day, are able to access the meaning of the structure with little or no mastery of the form. A new outlook and attitude to grammar is required, one that sees it as pivotal in

the mediation of meaning in everyday life. Crucially, whatever measure is chosen to resolve this particular issue, it realistically "must be consistent with the concept of language as a vehicle for communication" (Rutherford 1988, p. 182). For optimal communication, the learner must correctly form and use the copula.

1.5 The Copula: An Overview

Any brief outline of the copula (is) and its functions is nearly always set alongside the functions of the substantive verb in Irish *bí* for they both are discharged by a single verb in English, 'to be'. Here, Irish shares a similar verbal distinction with Spanish, which also possesses two verbs for 'to be' i.e. *ser* and *estar*. While the various verbal functions may not be exactly alike in terms of distribution, they do correspond to a significant degree. For example, *we are doctors* is translated into Irish as *is dochtúirí sinn* and into Spanish as *somos médicos* using the copula and *ser* respectively. Both of these verbs exhibit a characteristic of permanency and stability while the substantive *bí* and *estar* are both employed to describe a more transitory state, e.g. *we are in the shop* is translated into Irish as *táimid sa siopa* and into Spanish as *estamos en la tienda*'. Further analysis and discussion later in this and following chapters will aim to demonstrate the extent to which learners of Irish struggle to handle this fundamental verbal distinction comfortably and offer a number of explanations as to why this is occurring.

O' Leary's *Papers on Irish Idiom* (1905), published almost a century ago, could not fail to bring a wry smile to the faces of the thousands of Irish language teachers of today. In the chapter which deals with the copula and the substantive from the perspective of their meaning and their difference, he declares: "It is physically impossible for the Irish mind to use *is*, or any part of it, where *tá* (present affirmative form of the substantive), or any part of it, should be used. Hence it is not a question of logic for the Irish mind" (O' Leary 1922, p. 60). Nevertheless, his views on how basic these verbs were to the make-up of the aforementioned 'Irish mind' and their fundamental differences are worth quoting at length:

> Hence the two words (i.e. *is* and *tá*) must be fundamentally different. They must be so different in their nature that although no Irish rule was ever formed or written to regulate their use, still no Irish mind, educated or uneducated has ever used the one where the other should have been used. This is true of the most obscure disguises which the words can assume, and of the most varied changes to which they have been subjected by the lapse of ages. The oldest Irish manuscript observes the distinction exactly as it is now observed by the most ignorant Irish peasant (ibid, p.60).

Subsequent research on the evolution of the copula and the substantive dating from Old-Irish up until Modern Irish has shown that this supposedly unbridgeable divide between their respective functional domains has been and continues to be crossed: see Ó Siadhail (1983). Furthermore, grammarians over the past century have on numerous occasions provided the written rules regulating the use of these two verbs, e.g. O'Nolan (1934), Ó

hUallacháin (1975) and Ó Siadhail (1989). Indeed, they have done so in great depth. Such detail would be inappropriate and unnecessary in the context of this dissertation. Yet a brief outline of their functions and how they differ from each other is called for. While it could not be claimed that the copula is a defective verb, it remains the case that its usage is quite rare in some tenses, e.g., the future tense. This was not the case in Old Irish where it had a far greater coverage and was far more complex (Strachan & Bergin, 1949). This simplification of the role of the copula may be evidence of its gradual supplanting by the substantive verb. Four decades ago, David Greene (1965) described how the substantive verb was gradually encroaching onto the functional field of the copula. For instance, the substantive has evolved to produce two constructions that discharge the copular functions of identification and classification. Take a simple sentence like *she is a doctor*. Using the copula, it translates as *is dochtúir í* while the two substantive constructions produce *dochtúir atá inti* or *tá sí ina dochtúir* (slight difference in meaning, see 2.2.2 for further discussion on both structures). Pinker (1999 p.58) describes a similar linguistic merger in Middle-English. It is arguable whether there is a sufficient dynamic in the Irish language at present to see such a supplanting between the copula and the substantive reaching completion. As things stand, the copula continues to occupy significant coverage in spoken and written discourse. *Corpas Náisiúnta na Gaeilge*, an electronic corpus of Irish currently being compiled by Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann/Linguistics Institute of Ireland, identifies the copula as a feature of high frequency. It cannot be avoided.

1.5.1 Functions of the Copula

The copula has four principal functions: (a) classification, (b) identification, (c) exclamatory, and (d) comparative. Examples depicting the use of the copula will demonstrate the first two functions, will be restricted to the present and past tenses and the positive, negative and interrogative modes and will use the standardised form of the language. It will not deal with other tenses, nor with indirect speech, nor will it discuss the emphatic use of the copula, e.g. *Próiséas is ea é* or *it's a process*. The examples given simply correspond to the forms of the copula being taught and tested in Chapters Three and Four. Firstly, the classification function:

Is cuntasóir mé.	I'm an accountant
Ní dlíodóir mé.	I'm not a lawyer
An coirpeach tú?	Are you a criminal?
Nach breitheamh tú?	Aren't you a judge?
Ba scannán maith é	It was a good film
Níor throid chothrom í	It wasn't a fair fight
Ar thaispeántas é?	Was it an exhibition?
Nár mhistéir í?	Wasn't it a mystery?

As the above examples demonstrate, the predicate normally comes before the subject in the classificatory function. In addition, the predicate is almost always indefinite. Secondly, the identification function:

Is é Brian an ceannaire.	Brian is the leader.
Ní hiad na pinn na bronntanais.	The pens are not the presents.
An é seo an gluaisteán?	Is this the car?
Nach abhainn í an tSionainn?	Isn't the Shannon a river?
Ba sibh na laochra	You (pl.) were the heroes
Níor mise an fhinné	I wasn't the witness
Ar chuireadh í an litir?	Was the letter an invitation?
Nár tusa an garda sa dráma?	Weren't you the guard in the play?

These examples are deliberately simple and avoid further complications in the past tense where nouns begin with a vowel. They demonstrate however that the subject comes before the predicate and that both the noun and the predicate are definite. What must be obvious is the fundamental necessity of the copula in Irish. The ability to identify and classify things in this world is a basic psychological need and all languages have evolved to meet this requirement. While learners of Irish as a second language may not psychologically need Irish to be able to categorise and make sense of their environment, linguistically they are hindered if they lack an awareness of, and an ability to manipulate the copula. It is not that they cannot communicate what they want to say but that they do so by what are still judged to be erroneous means, i.e. they use the substantive instead. Therefore, the copula quite simply *must* be taught.

Learners' first encounter with the copula often involves constructions where the copula *is* combines with the preposition *le* to express everyday functions such as like/dislike, indications of ownership, possibility and preference as well as a whole host of other uses as the following examples taken from Máire Owens (1990) demonstrate:

a. Attitude	Is dóigh léi (She thinks)
b. Memory	Is cuimhin linn (We remember)
c. Surprise	Ní hionadh liom (I'm not surprised)

In addition, Owens cites the lists of functions in *Toward a Communicative Curriculum in Irish* (Little, Ó Murchú & Singleton, 1985) and their observation that the copula is particularly important in "coping with the mechanics of conversational interaction" (op.cit., p.109). In her longitudinal study of her daughter's acquisition of Irish as a second language, Owens remarked how the copula proved to be the one area of the verbal system where Eithne made little progress. She cites factors such as insufficient exposure to the copula and a consequent failure to isolate and understand the conditions of its use. It is quite possible that many young learners today in both primary and secondary schools are receive even less exposure to copular functions and would therefore be expected to struggle to master the copula. This appears to be very much the case as indicated by a test I carried out at the beginning of February 2002 in an all-boys secondary school in Cork. Of this, more later (see 1.6). For readers who have limited or no knowledge of Irish, Table 1 is given below to briefly illustrate what is going wrong.

Table 1

The Copula	The Substantive Verb	What is going wrong?
1. Is tigh é. *It's a house.* 2. Ní ostán é. *It isn't a hotel.* 3. An puball é? *Is it a tent?*	1. Tá sé daor *It is dear.* 2. Níl sé saor. *It isn't cheap.* 3. An bhfuil sé le fáil? *Is it available?*	1. * Tá sé tigh. *It's a house.* 2. * Níl sé ostán. *It isn't a hotel.* 3. * An bhfuil sé puball? *Is it a tent?*

So, while insufficient exposure may explain to a certain extent the lack of progress in acquiring the copula, there are, to my mind, other factors involved that ought to be considered. Firstly, I believe that the copula is no longer being formally taught in many primary and secondary schools. Instead, what we have is a deep misunderstanding of the potential role of grammar in the communicative method where an excessive reliance is placed on the hope that learners will somehow isolate the copula and how it differs from the substantive through the written and spoken discourse of the classroom. Such an approach is akin to what Corder terms the 'sunburn effect'. Frankly, this is an abdication of the teacher's job. Teaching is "the methodical or systematic organisation of data for learning" (Corder 1988, p.126) and failure to explicitly or implicitly draw learners' attention to form results in them having "at best a foggy sense of how their target language works" (Little 1994, p.100). Secondly, the learner's extreme lack of exposure to Irish outside the classroom highlights the critical nature of input enhancement and induced salience and exposes the silly idealism of the aforementioned 'sunburn effect' in this particular context. Sunburn is a rare enough commodity in this country and is normally only available when the schools are well and truly shut! Thirdly, responses from a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) completed by teachers, suggest that teachers are choosing not to teach the copula in the belief that it is beyond the reach of their pupils and/or that there is insufficient support for teachers in textbooks and other materials to facilitate its transmission. Fourthly, and most worrying of all, there is now strong evidence that many learners are being instructed through the medium of English. The Chief Examiners' report on the performance of learners in the ordinary level Irish paper in the Junior Certificate of 2000 has the following to say:

> Bhí caighdeán na Gaeilge go huafásach. Lochtanna coitianta: easpa foclóra, Béarla á úsáid, drochghramadach, droch-chomhréir, drochlitriú. Bhí claonadh i mbliana, níos mó ná mar a bhí le blianta beaga anuas, dul i muinín an Bhéarla (Chief Examiners' Report, 2000, p.13).
>
> (The standard of Irish was awful. Common errors included: a lack of vocabulary, the use of English, poor grammar, poor syntax, poor spelling. This year, there was a tendency greater than in recent years to resort to English. [my translation])

In the same vein:

> Ón méid Béarla atá le feiceáil sna freagraí, tá sé soiléir go múintear an Ghaeilge go hiomlán trí Béarla ina lán scoileanna (ibid., p.13).
>
> (From the amount of English that can be seen, it is clear that Irish is being taught completely through English in a lot of schools [my translation])

In the light of such observations, it should hardly come as any surprise to us that learners struggle to acquire this aspect of Irish grammar. The copula is relatively difficult compared to other grammatical aspects of the language and therefore demands attention. As a teacher of Irish, I have consciously spent a lot of time over the last three years endeavouring to teach the copula with mixed results. As a student, I was rarely if ever formally taught the 'ins and outs' of the copula over a period of fourteen years. It wasn't until halfway through university that I actually received the instruction that I required. Over twenty years ago Ó Baoill (1981) analysed the errors evident in the essays of two hundred candidates in the higher level Leaving Certificate paper. On the high level of errors made in technically copular contexts, he remarked:

> Díobháil cleachtaidh ar chaint nadúrtha agus ag brath ró-mhór ar an Bhéarla mar shlat tomhais, is cionsiocair leis na hearráidí ar fad, féadaim a rá (Ó Baoill 1981, p.302).
>
> (I can say that a lack of practice in conversational Irish and an over-dependence on English as a yardstick are the primary causes for all the errors. [my translation])

Two decades on, learners and teachers are still grappling with this aspect of Irish grammar. Owens's suspicion that the copula is in the process of dying out is supported by relevant linguistic research (Ó Siadhail, 1983, Ó Catháin, 2001). However, as long as learners' levels of correctness are measured according to the Official Standard (An Caighdeán Oifigiúil), the *status quo* of high levels of copular errors will remain unchallenged. Research and positive suggestions are called for. Such is the topic of this dissertation.

1.6 Determining the extent of the problem

Having decided upon the dissertation topic, my main concern was to get an indication as to the level of difficulty learners were experiencing in the classroom. As a logical extension, I designed a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to determine the attitudes of teachers at both primary and post-primary level regarding the instruction of the copula. As already mentioned, I conducted a test (see Appendix 2) in February 2002 in an all-boys secondary school in Cork. Note that two other tests were administered to learners in third-year and sixth-year (see Appendices 3 & 4). The first-year test consisted of two sections, the first being the direct written translation of six sentences from Irish into

English, while the second looked for the direct written translation of six sentences from English into Irish. The six sentences in section two demanded the use of either the copula or the substantive verb. Both sections had an equal distribution of positive, negative and interrogative modes. Critically, all twelve sentences contained, whether in Irish or English, one verb, i.e. 'to be'.

The test-takers were a first-year class of twenty-four learners, aged between twelve and fourteen. Their class teacher introduced me and informed the learners I was a teacher of Irish in the same school, currently on study leave. To all intents and purposes though, I was very much a stranger to them. As I distributed the test, I stressed that this test was for my benefit only, that there was no need to write their names on the test-paper, that they could have as much time as they wished to complete the test, that all questions were welcome and that their parents/guardians were not going to be informed of the results. Furthermore, I translated, in both directions, any words they did not know (admittedly few as the words were of a very basic nature). My sole area of interest was how they would cope with the verbal particle of the sentences. Interestingly, while a number of questions were asked, not one of them looked for assistance in dealing with the verb. We took the first sentence in the first section, i.e. *is ceapaire é* as an example and translated it together. While issues of test reliability and validity will be raised in Chapter Three as well as a proper analysis of the results, two aggregate results for the translation of two sentences provide food for thought.

Following eight years of formal instruction in Irish at primary level, which Harris (1991) roughly estimates to account for a total of 1728 hours of exposure, only six of the twenty learners were able to correctly translate the copular sentence *it's a tree*. Of further concern was the failure of all but two of the same group of learners to correctly translate the copular sentence *it isn't a shoe*. While conscious of the danger of equating accuracy with acquisition or inferring one from the other, these preliminary figures confirmed the difficulties that I had witnessed with every Irish class that I have taught since qualifying as a teacher. Not alone do they indicate particular learner difficulties, they tentatively suggest that teachers are either no longer devoting sufficient time to the instruction of the copula and/or that current methodologies are failing both the teacher and the learner. We need to dig deeper.

1.7 Summary

This chapter has attempted to provide an explanatory context in which current issues concerning the teaching and learning of Irish must be considered. Language surveys undertaken to determine the attitudes of the public have consistently revealed a plurality of dispositions. In total, they illustrate a satisfaction with state provision for the language in that both they and the state implicitly agree that the long-term survival of Irish remains the responsibility of the education system and the school-going generation. The disappointment that inevitably results has also consistently entailed a high level of dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching being delivered by teachers of Irish. While conscious of the lack of societal support in general, it is submitted that Irish teachers need to examine and understand why these poor ratings of their pedagogical practice repeat

themselves. It is proposed that much of this unhappiness with the quality of Irish instruction stems from an inability to sufficiently embed grammar in the communicative approach to language learning without compromising the fundamental tenets of this approach. Current disappointment with levels of attainment is exemplified by the failure of learners to successfully acquire certain fundamental grammatical features, among them the copula. In setting out to investigate why this is so, an overview of the copula and its notional/functional features was conducted. The chapter concluded with a brief description of how preliminary data documenting the extent of the problem was obtained, and the scale of the problem facing the teacher/researcher. Chapter Two aims to locate the root causes of this learning failure and considers how recent research in SLA may aid us in our quest.

Chapter Two: Searching for Solutions

2.1 Introduction

Chapter One focussed on positioning a learning difficulty in Irish within a broader socio-educational perspective. The difficulty in question is the proficient formation and use of the copula. In recognising that successful solutions can only result through adequate analysis, this chapter begins with an overview of some of the potential root causes that hinder the learner in mastering the copula. In searching for possible solutions, I will consider some of the more promising recent findings of SLA research. In doing so, the chapter charts a path towards a process of teacher-led research where theory will inform practice and where practice will evaluate such theory in the social reality of the classroom.

2.2 Root Causes of the Problem

While written with much more than language learning in mind, the quotation below reminds both researchers and teachers that the language experience begins and ends with the learner. Failure to acknowledge this fundamental truth will unavoidably compromise the expertise the learner requires of his/her teacher. In attempting to isolate the roots of the difficulty in learning the copula, we find an appropriate starting point. Soren Kierkegaard quoted by Lentz (2000, p.193):

> When one has to bring a person to a certain place, one should first of all take care to meet him, where he is and start from there. This is the secret of the art of helping. Anyone who cannot do this deceives himself if he thinks he can help another person. Because to be able to truly help somebody else, I need to know more than he does by understanding what he knows. If I don't do that, my greater knowledge does not help him at all.

2.2.1 A System at Odds with Itself

Every September, secondary teachers are presented with a fresh batch of first-year students. Normally, they come from local primary schools known as feeder schools but against the current backdrop of a declining population, secondary schools, particularly in urban areas, now venture beyond their former catchment areas and compete for their registration. Until recently, applicants were often assessed in the three core subjects, i.e. English, Irish and mathematics prior to acceptance. Such assessment still takes place today, but after the learner has been accepted. This new approach is to be welcomed as it precludes schools from discriminating against learners on academic grounds. The outcome, given that some of the learners may come from Irish-medium primary schools (Gaelscoileanna), is that secondary teachers of Irish meet a group of students with a veritable kaleidoscope of proficiencies and attitudes. Accepting Kierkegaard's advice of being careful 'to meet him where he is and start from there' proves extremely difficult. While more proficient learners do offer themselves as potential assets to the practitioner, the initial assortment of levels is disturbing. Even among learners who attended schools where Irish is taught as a subject, the differences in linguistic outcome after eight years of formal instruction are startling. While anecdotal as evidence, conversations with fellow secondary teachers have often revealed a belief that primary teachers, relieved of preparing their learners for crucial entrance tests, have chosen to spend less time teaching Irish, with inevitable consequences. Conversely, some primary teachers have expressed their amazement to this author at how quickly the fruits of their endeavours are undone by poor quality teaching at secondary level. Such opposing views are symptomatic of the lack of cohesiveness and co-operation between the primary and post-primary sectors.

Meeting these first-year students over the three years that I have been teaching, I have never had any idea what each student has actually achieved in Irish, what communicative tasks he can handle, what projects he has undertaken, the extent of his ability to interact in groups. In short, no account seems to be *required* of the progressive stages and barriers that the learner has negotiated. It appears that these areas of assessment lie within the remit of the recipient secondary school. The current curriculum for Irish at primary level,

introduced in 1999 (Curaclam na Gaeilge, 1999), is a very welcome document on the whole. While accepting that assessment is a *central* part of the teaching and learning process, only the final ten pages (pp.142-151) in the document are actually devoted to matters dealing with assessment. On the final page, it proposes the following potential beneficiaries of a continuous process of assessment during the learner's time in primary school:

> Beidh measúnú fhoghlaim na Gaeilge ag teacht le polasaí measúnaithe na scoile i leith na n-ábhar uile. Beidh an t-eolas a bhaileofar usáideach don pháiste, don mhúinteoir, do thuismitheoirí nó chaomhnóirí agus don scoil (Curaclam na Gaeilge 1999, p.151).
>
> (Assessment of the learning of Irish shall be in accordance with the school's policy of assessment regarding all subjects. The information that will be collected will be useful to the child, the teacher, the parents or guardians and the school. [my translation])

The possibility that such information could be of enormous benefit to the secondary teacher appears not to have been considered by the designers of the curriculum. Moreover, the above quotation indicates that each school may have its own particular policy of assessment and nowhere in the curriculum is it stated that teachers are actually *obliged* to compile a linguistic profile of their pupils. The lack of a clear cohesive structure regarding assessment procedures between the primary and secondary curricula is perhaps best exemplified by their almost divergent emphases. Quoting again from the primary curriculum:

> Déanfar measúnú ar éisteacht agus ar labhairt go háirithe, ag aithint gurb iad is tabhachtaí sa churaclam seo, agus ní ar léitheoireacht agus ar scríbhneoireacht amháin (ibid., p. 143).
>
> (In particular, listening and speaking will be assessed as these two [skills] are the most important in this curriculum and not solely reading and writing. [my translation])

Secondary teachers, however, are confronted with completely different emphases of assessment as they are obliged to prepare their learners for the Junior Certificate. Ten years since the Junior Certificate was first examined in 1992, there is still no assessment of learners' oral proficiency. Moreover, the testing of reading and writing abilities still accounts for more than sixty-five per cent of the available marks. At this point, all one can say is such a lack of coherence in the instruction and assessment of the same language to potentially the same group of learners is truly farcical. For good measure, the Leaving Certificate then decides to require learners to sit an oral exam worth 25% of the final mark. In effect, a learner spends four years in secondary school without an official oral assessment. In fifth year, teachers are expected (many wait until sixth year) to wave their magical wands and intone two words: open sesame. This situation is surely not conducive to producing a sufficient cohort of proficient speakers on an annual basis.

2.2.2 The Copula: Sources of Error

Human learning, in whatever form it takes, is inevitably a process where mistakes are made. Yet human learning also entails the recognition of such mistakes and their gradual removal, if that is within the learners' capacity. Before any attempt is made to arrive at the reasons why learners struggle with the copula, a distinction must be drawn between the terms 'mistake' and 'error'. The former stands for the slip-ups that native speakers commit every day whereas the latter refers to the "idiosyncrasies in the interlanguage of the learner that are direct manifestations of a language within which a learner is operating at the time" (Brown 1994, p.205). In their famous 'Hierarchy of Difficulty', elaborated when Contrastive Analysis was at its height, Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (1965) created a tool by which a language teacher could predict which aspects of the target language would prove most troublesome. In the same hierarchy, the copula would have been identified as a level 5 (the most difficult level) 'split' where "one item in the native language becomes two or more in the target language requiring the learner to make a new distinction" (Brown 1994, p.196). Further research exposed the inadequacies of this hierarchy and that of contrastive analysis itself in reliably equating learner difficulty with the differences between L1 and L2. A more refined approach to Contrastive Analysis set about attempting to identify areas of difference which did actually create problems for the learner and "one difference that frequently, if not always, leads to difficulty is that in which a structure in one language has not one but two (or more) counterparts in another language" (Odlin 1989, p.30). For two such counterparts in Irish, read the copula and the substantive.

Many of the teachers who agreed to answer my questionnaire (Appendix 1) — designed to elicit teachers attitudes regarding the teaching of the copula — identified the interference of learners' L1, i.e. English, as the main retarding factor in its acquisition. The term 'Interference' has an unhelpful, negative connotation and Odlin (1989) prefers the more neutral term 'transfer', which allows for both a positive and a negative aspect. Positive transfer between languages can only be determined by comparing the acquisition rates of groups of learners with different native languages. It may come as a surprise to some, but Irish is taught to learners all over the world with a multitude of mother tongues. Research into how learners — whose L1 is not English, and particularly those whose language contains two or more verbs for 'to be'— cope with the distinction between the copula and the substantive could prove extremely valuable to Irish language teachers in Ireland. Negative transfer occurs where cross-linguistic differences produce learner deviations from the norms of the L2. They are often manifested through underproduction or overproduction. It is common knowledge amongst teachers in Irish that the copula is underproduced and that the substantive is overproduced. Research is urgently needed to explain why learners avoid the copula in favour of the substantive. There are undoubtedly many reasons. When the teachers were asked (in the aforementioned questionnaire) whether teachers avoided teaching the copula, many agreed that this was the case as it was held either to be too complicated to explain to learners or because some teachers themselves had difficulty in understanding it. One teacher responded that "One can find alternative ways of phrasing a sentence in Irish and these can often be more

straightforward." It is a pity that the respondent didn't provide an example of such alternative phrasing. Yet, it would seem plausible to infer — *faute de mieux* — that where the only alternative to using the copula is the substantive (for it would be hard to avoid using the verb *to be* entirely), the teacher may be advocating the use of sentences such as *tá sé ina bhainisteoir* as an acceptable and easier equivalent to the copular *is bainisteoir é*. Strictly speaking, these two phrases are not semantically equivalent as the first translates as 'he has become a manager' while the second means simply 'he is a manager'. Moreover, when said quickly, the former could quite reasonably be received by an early learner as *tá sé bainisteoir,* an error all too regularly observed by Irish teachers throughout the country. The other substantive alternative, *bainisteoir atá ann,* is semantically accurate. From experience inside the classroom, however, this is not a particularly easy structure to teach. The word *ann* is a prepositional pronoun which comprises the third personal pronoun *é* and the preposition *i* (in). Each of the personal pronouns combine with the preposition to form completely different word forms e.g., *i* and the first personal pronoun *mé* synthesise to produce *ionam*. The copular structure *is bainisteoir mé* contains only the first personal pronoun *mé* and performs the exact same function. I am not calling for some sort of simplification of the language. Rather I am suggesting that the burden on early learners to identify and classify objects/people may be lightened by initially sticking to the less complicated copular structure.

Another cause may lie in the disarray evident in the divergent modes of assessment between the primary and secondary curricula. In the primary curriculum, where the overarching emphasis is on communication and where formal accuracy is not the main priority in assessment, learners may justifiably think that such a need for accuracy between the two verbs is not communicatively necessary. Arthur Hughes' view that testing has a crucial role to play in the schema of language teaching rings very true: "Areas which are not tested are likely to become areas ignored in teaching and learning" (Hughes 1989, p.23). These reasons, along with many others, are making a difficult task even harder. The arduous task of assimilating new information (that it is possible for there to exist two verbs in the L2 equivalent to one verb in the L1), which may go against everything the learner already knows, is captured well by Little who argues that "when the new knowledge conflicts in some way with the learner's existing system of constructs — perhaps because it explicitly contradicts part of the system, or entails a new way of thinking about it — then learning can be not only difficult but painful" (Little 1991, p.19). We may not have intended the learners to struggle with this aspect of Irish; yet with two self-serving curricula, an apparent reluctance among teachers to deal with the problem and a paucity of research, that is exactly what we are doing.

2.3 Reaching for Solutions

A recognition of the fundamental ailments besetting the quality of Irish language instruction does not relieve current practitioners from endeavouring to overcome certain pedagogical problems within the confines of the class. Wallowing in self-pity and sheer helplessness does nothing to resolve the difficulties that we observe in our learners on a daily basis. Our main priority as teachers is to maximise the amount of learning that takes place during our period of contact with our learners. To optimally fulfil this task, we must

have a theoretical understanding of what occurs in the language learning process that will underpin and guide our choice of methodologies as we expose learners to the target language. While being a comparably young field of empirical research, the study of second language acquisition (SLA) continues to provide a host of provisional specifications regarding language acquisition which teachers may validate in their own classroom. Yet, too often teachers have refused to involve themselves in research activity and have still not divested themselves of an attitude which exposes them as being "notoriously hostile to theoretical discussion, believing that it has nothing to offer practitioners in the classroom" (Little 1994, p.118). The longer teachers happily agree to leave research to a centralised department and unquestioningly accept departmental curricula and their subsequent interpretations by textbook publishers, the less meaningful our profession becomes. While written ten years ago, Legutke's observation of the need for teacher development holds true today: "What is at stake for teachers in widening the scope of their classroom roles [...] is a form of professional development which will lead to the renewal of their curriculum and of themselves as interpreters and creators of themselves" (Legutke & Thomas 1991, p.304). SLA research into the effect of instruction and its place in the wider framework of language acquisition has been extensive. While many questions remain unanswered, a considerable number of findings are available that should be of great interest to teachers of Irish.

2.3.1 The Effect of Instruction on SLA

For the sake of clarity, I shall define instruction as the "systematic or methodical organisation and presentation of data for learning" (Corder 1988, p.125) and SLA as the process by which "children and adults acquire (learn) second languages in addition to their native tongue and learn to speak these abilities in natural settings or in instructional settings" (Kramsch 2000, p.315). While dated, Larsen-Freeman & Long's (1991) comprehensive review of the relevant literature and their conclusions remain valid. In general terms, "while [...] developmental sequences indeed seem impervious to instruction, a focus on form, or language as object, does appear to have beneficial effects in the other three areas [processes, rate of acquisition and level of ultimate attainment], the effect on rate of acquisition being especially evident" (1991, p.300). A more recent study conducted by Jones (1998) into the efficacy of self-instruction provides plenty food for thought. He conducted seventy interviews with adult learners who had some experience of self-instruction in a foreign language. Not alone did his conclusions point to the superiority of formal instruction for beginners but he also posited that the best and most efficient "learning route appears to be starting with class work, but adding or going over to self-instruction at a later stage; *ab initio* self-instruction results in low command and high drop-out rates" (Jones 1998, p.378). Numerous other studies cast doubt on the actual effectiveness of instruction, e.g., Dulay & Burt (1977), Krashen (1982a), Spada (1986). Yet, if the sole effect of instruction is, as Jones's study suggests, one of aiding the learner to attain a sufficient level of independence in his acquisition; it would seem reasonable to infer that instruction has a significant role to play.

2.3.2 How does Instruction effect SLA?

While the evidence concerning the positive effect of instruction on SLA could not be considered to be overwhelming, the evidence pertaining to exactly *how* instruction has such an effect is certainly found wanting. The reality is that despite considerable investigation, "research to date has failed to reveal a golden language-teaching technique that absolutely guarantees successful acquisition" (Sharwood Smith 1994, p.21). All that can be offered to practitioners are a number of theories and methodologies that make sound logical arguments regarding their potential utility but which scientific research has yet to validate. Among the more promising is the interface position.

2.3.3 The Interface Position

Appealing and accessible to teachers, the interface position offers a possible insight into how learned knowledge of the target language is transformed into acquired knowledge. Larsen-Freeman & Long describe how advocates of this approach claim "that while new TL forms can be and are acquired directly in something like the way children acquire a first language, they also posit a process whereby forms are initially learned with some kind of awareness of the learning, and then transformed, e.g. from 'learning' to 'acquisition' (Stevick, 1980)" (1991, p.324). The current interpretation of such an approach is that of a properly conceived communicative approach to learning which, is not only seen "as fundamentally an inductive process but one which can be controlled and facilitated by descriptions/explanations at the appropriate time and formulated in a way appropriate to learners' maturity" (Corder 1988, p.134). The successful fusion of learning and acquisition is due to language awareness. Little identifies two types of awareness: psycholinguistic awareness, independent of conscious reflection, and awareness in a general educational sense resulting from explicit instruction at school. The two different types of learner that have emerged from the Irish classroom over the last four decades have nearly always possessed one of the above but rarely both. Successfully fostering these two types of awareness in the learner "is one of the central problems that second-language pedagogy has to solve" (Little 1997, p.99). Little sees the instruction of writing as the true filter through which language awareness as outlined above can be achieved: "communicative and reflective writing tasks mediate between these two aspects of learning, creating a pedagogical interface between the two kinds of language awareness." (ibid., p.103) The fruits of empowering learners with an implicit and explicit awareness of what they are doing has been validated. Singleton (1992, p.55) cites studies that "show a strong positive correlation between degree of language awareness and degree of autonomy". Learner Autonomy, is defined by Little as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (Little, 1991, p.4). As Jones's study revealed, such self-sufficiency or autonomy may well be the greatest skill that teachers can help their learners develop for the time inevitably arrives when learner and teacher must bid each other farewell.

2.3.4 SLA Research: A New Perspective

Throughout the nineties, there have been calls to SLA researchers (from colleagues and teachers) to reassess their modes of investigation in order to interpret their findings on the basis of the reality that is the language classroom and the myriad of potentially influential

variables that effect acquisition. There is a perceived lack of relevancy in their findings/proposals that has erected an unnecessary barrier between theorists and practitioners. This is a pity when both groups have so much to offer each other. Larsen-Freeman (2000) notes how some mainstream researchers have viewed classroom learning as a non-social phenomenon. One of the main criticisms has been a perceived imbalance in favour of researching the psycholinguistic or morphosyntactic development of the learner at the expense of his sociocultural development. She cites Breen (1998), who holds that researchers have been erroneous in their assumption that "the interaction between the learner's mental resources and the features of the linguistic input will provide a sufficiently adequate explanation of language learning" (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p.168). In response, some SLA researchers, clearly under the influence of Vygotsky, have taken a theoretical position to reflect what they believe is the inherent social nature of learning. Human learning according to Vygotsky, "presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p.88). Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995), cited in Larsen-Freeman, claim that sociocultural theory "situates the locus of learning in the dialogic interactions that arise between socially constructed individuals engaged in activities which are co-constructed with other individuals rather than in the heads of solipsistic beings" (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p.169).

2.3.5 Focus on Form

As already stated, one of the principal arguments evinced by teachers who were suspicious of the communicative approach and indeed of the audio-lingual method, was that there was a perception, an inevitability given the inadequacy of teacher training, that there was no room in the inn for grammar teaching. Intuitively, it did not sit well; a point noted by Little (1994) in his observation of Irish primary teachers who, sensibly in his eyes, simply refused to identify grammar with the misguided methods of yesteryear. And yet, they were and remain confronted with the communicative syllabus and its inherent objectives and struggle to find ways in which a focus on form may be communicatively operationalised. Their firm belief in the necessity to incorporate grammar in their teaching has been substantially validated by research, which also reveals however that best results are achieved when mediated via communicative interaction. Patsy Lightbown (1998, p.192) quotes research indicating "that teachers who focus learners' attention on specific language features are more effective than those who never focus on form or who do so only in isolated 'grammar classes'." Focus on form or FonF will be defined as a procedure that "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding emphasis is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991, pp.45-46). The compromise between the need to use and to master form has to lie in methodologies that are "implicit enough so as to not disturb the communicative flow yet salient enough so as to be potentially effective" (Doughty & Varela 1998, p.117). For teachers of Irish wishing to support their learners in mastering the copula, this embedding of grammar in communicative methodologies has to take place. Psychological investigation as cited by Lightbown (1998) has revealed that learners remember best when they return to the context in which learning took place. Learning the intricacies of the copula via a paradigm on a blackboard, a teaching method I have used, is bound to be

of limited benefit to a student when he or she is asked to write a letter of complaint to a television station. As Doughty & Williams point out, focus on form "has an advantage over the traditional isolated grammar context in that the learner's attention is drawn precisely to a linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand" (1998, p. 3).

While such an approach is consistent with the ideals of communicative syllabi and is the primary route that Irish teachers need to take, further research has also demonstrated that explicit instruction should not be banished entirely from the language classroom. Little (1994) argues that since planned discourse in the form of essays and letter-writing form a sizeable part of current assessment modes and given that the communicative efficacy of the above depend to a certain extent on formal accuracy and to a greater extent on syntactic transparency, explicit knowledge of form has to be a resource upon which the learner may draw. More significantly, such knowledge can "help learners to reflect on the process and content of their learning in such a way as gradually to free themselves from the immediate context of learning" (Little 1994, p.104). Sadly, the current linguistic reality in Ireland means that the 'immediate context of learning' (the school) is for most, the only context of learning. If a young learner of Irish is to have any hope of functioning independently/autonomously as a motivated language learner outside the school, he *must* have a sufficient level of explicit grammatical knowledge upon completion of formal education. Our approach therefore, has to be twofold, yet with one aim - "to do what good teachers, good doctors, good consultants have always done: to make ourselves redundant (because we've achieved the help that was needed from us) as quickly and enjoyably as possible" (Whitehead 2000, p.92).

2.4 Summary

The first section of this chapter provided a gloomy depiction of the type of instruction that is available to learners of Irish. They are forced to deal with inconsistent curricula, modes of assessment that, collectively, appear to strive for ultimate confusion and an apparently incohesive profession. I continued, in the second section, to consider a number of the more relevant findings in recent SLA research. This research, as we can see, has the potential to assist language practitioners to a great degree. What then, does it tell us? Firstly, it confirms that instruction has a positive role in the overall schema of acquisition in that it aids and accelerates the process where learners are able to attain a level of independence in their appropriation of the target language. Secondly, acknowledging the limits of a teacher's potential impact implies that the burden of language learning can ultimately only be carried by the learner if mastery of the tongue is to be achieved. This entails that the concern of the teacher needs to focus on the learning process and how best to facilitate and equip the learner as he undertakes this journey. Thirdly, the evidence underlines the importance of developing an implicit and explicit awareness of language in reaching the promised land of acquisition. Fourthly, there now exists a theoretical basis for the incorporation of grammar into communicative activities, i.e FonF. Finally and most importantly, the 'locus of learning' is logically and most advantageously situated in the dialogic interactions between social individuals in the shared pursuit of understanding and of being understood. Such knowledge needs to inform our work as we set about creating tasks, activities and materials that will aid learners to acquire the more basic parts of the copula. This work is described in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Inside the Classroom

3.1 Introduction

The last chapter examined the possible root causes that may account for the difficulty learners experience when attempting to use and form the copula. I argued that irrespective of the obstacles that practitioners face in their classrooms, there exists a great need for teacher-led theoretical and empirical research into specific areas of language learning difficulty. This chapter begins by describing a series of tasks that I will use when I teach a class for a week in the school where the pre-tests, documenting the extent

I see a tree, a house and a river

T: Feiceann tú crann, an crann mór e (copula)?
You see a tree, is it a big tree?

L: Tá sé mór (preference to answer using the substantive).
It is big

T: Go maith, is crann mór é. An crann mór é?
Good! It's a big tree. Is it a big tree?

L: Is crann mór e. (copular answer)
It's a big tree

T: A Roibeáird, an abhainn í seo (copula)? (pointing to the tree)
Robert, is this a river?

L: Níl. Tá sé crann (incorrect substantive)
No, it's a tree.

T: Ní abhainn í. Is crann é. Abair é sin arís.
It isn't a river. It's a tree. Say that again.

L: Ní abhainn í. Is crann é.
It isn't a river. It's a tree.

T. Go maith! anois, a Stiofáin, cá bhfuil an teach?
Good! Now Steven, where is the house?
L: Tá sé sa choill
It's in the woods.

T: Ar fheabhas! An leatsa an teach (copula)?
Excellent ! Is it your house?

L: Níl (incorrect substantive)
No.

T: Ní hea. Ní liomsa an teach. Abair é sin arís.
No. It isn't my house. Say that again.

L: Ní hea. Ní liomsa an teach. (copular answer)
No. It isn't my house

T: Is le Jack é.
It's Jack's

As the activity opens up, the picture becomes more complicated, with an old man appearing on the scene followed closely by a young girl with a basket. Eventually, the house goes on fire, an aeroplane may be seen overhead and a car is parked mysteriously at the mouth of the forest. The above dialogue gives an indication of the verbal usages that I want to direct learners' attention towards. The class is then divided up into groups of four or five and given materials to design their own picture to be subsequently hung up on the wall. Each group has to present their picture in front of their peers and identify the characters, cite their location, explain their actions and indicate ownership where necessary. In such instances, the copula has to be used side by side with the substantive verb. In turn, the class is invited to ask questions regarding the pictures which allow for the practising of the interrogative forms of the two verbs. The lessons concludes with a brief class reflection on what we have just done. All of the subsequent classes conclude with a similar period of reflection. This is to be conducted solely through English.

Task 2

Entitled *I'm a butcher* (Maley & Duff 1982, p.70), this activity again seeks to illustrate the frequency of the two verbs, their clearly defined functions and how they could naturally occur within the same sentence. Under the guise of a memory game, the whole class is arranged in a circle. Each student is presented with two slips of paper, one of them informing him of his occupation and the other offering an adjective to describe his character. Occupations varied from the mundane 'policeman' to the more exotic 'dictator' while adjectives were deliberately familiar. The game begins with the first student in the circle telling the class of his job followed by a description of his character. The next student will have to repeat the same information using the second personal pronoun 'tú' as well as introducing his own new identity. For example:

> Learner 1: Is (copula) tiománaí F1 mé. Táim (substantive) dainséarach.
> *I'm a F1driver. I'm dangerous.*
>
> Learner 2: Is tiománaí F1 tú. Tá tú dainséarach. Is dornálaí mé agus táim saibhir.
> *You're a driver. You're dangerous. I'm a boxer and I'm rich.*

So, each learner has to remember the description of the previous speaker and also introduce himself. This may sound terribly basic, yet some learners have difficulty producing the above sentences in a fluent manner. After every student has his turn, the game broadens out with learners being asked at random to repeat what has just been said and introduce his new identity again. This requires the attention of the learners. The task increases in difficulty as learners are forced to remember the descriptions of the past two speakers. As a follow up activity, four learners are invited to mime their occupation, which in turn encourages the desired interrogative forms of the copula and the substantive.

Task 3

Requiring two full lessons, this task entitled *Shipwrecked* (Marsland 1998, p.53) is the most challenging of all. The class is immediately divided up into groups. Each group is presented with an envelope containing fifteen strips of paper, of one or two sentence in length, which collectively form the text of a well-known joke. Their task is to assemble the strips in the correct order. Translations of some of the more difficult items of vocabulary are provided. Each group is also given a dictionary to look up any other words. The text has been deliberately modified to ensure that each strip of paper has at least one if not two instances of copular/substantive use. In addition, each text contains three deliberate errors in the use of the copula and/or the substantive. After each group has correctly arranged the text of the joke, they are invited in turn to write the mistakes that they have identified on the blackboard, explain to the class why they thought the sentences were incorrect and suggest what should be the correct replacement. This part of the activity, which accounts for the reflective part of the lesson again, will be done through English.

Shipwrecked

The text of the joke is included below. It tells the tale of three male friends stranded on a remote island. One day they find a lamp. They rub it and not surprisingly a genie appears who grants them one wish each. The first guy goes home to see his girlfriend as does the second guy. The third guy, feeling very lonely, decides to wish for his friends to be brought back. Note that the italicised words belong to the copula, those in bold belong to the substantive and the underlined sentences are where the deliberate mistakes are located.

Longbhriste

C **Tá** triúr fear longbhriste ar oileán sceirdiúil(remote) agus *is* mairnéalaigh(sailors) iad.

E *Is* oileán an-álainn é. <u>Tá sí áit an-shuaimhneach</u>.(peaceful)

F Lá amháin, tagann siad ar (they find) lampa sa choill.

O *Is* lampa an-sheanda(ancient) é ach **tá** sé salach.

I Tosnaíonn siad á ghlanadh agus nochtann(appears) ginid ghlinne(genie) os a gcomhair.

H **Tá** an ginid ghlinne an-fhlaithiúl. Tugann sé guí (wish) do gach duine acu.

M *Is* fir chliste(clever) iad agus déanann siad machnamh cúramach air.

L Labhrann an chéad mhairnéalach agus deir sé gur mhaith leis dul abhaile go Zoe. *Is* í a chailín í.

N I bpreabadh na súl, imíonn sé as a radharc.

A Deireann an dara mairnéalach an rud céanna.

D **Tá** an triú mairnéalach fágtha. *Is* fear uaigneach é. Tá sé amadán freisin.

J Tugann sé uair a chloig ag machnamh ar a ghuí. Níl sé siúráilte.

K Ar deireadh, labhrann se leis an nginid ghlinne.

B Teastaíonn uaim(I want) mo chairde a fháil thar n-ais.

G *Is* scéal fíor (true) é seo.

Task 4

A game which has been around a long time, *Who am I?*, looks to be tailor made to aid the instruction of the copula. On this occasion, the students are allowed to form their own groups. A volunteer is found to sit at the top of the class. A slip of paper is stuck onto his forehead. On the slip, written in bold, is the identity of a famous celebrity. Each group is asked to write a clue using, in rotation, a positive/negative copular construction or a positive/negative substantive construction. The learner, having heard the clues from the groups, has then the right to ask two questions about his new identity. Sometimes, the questions will demand a copular or substantive structure. One of the celebrities was the Irish international footballer, Damien Duff. Here is what the class actually offered:

Group One: Is fear é.
He is a man

Group Two: Ní bean í.
He isn't a woman

Group Three: Tá sé le Blackburn Rovers.
He is with Blackburn Rovers

Group Four: Níl sé dubh.
He isn't black.

The second part of the activity involves a reversal of roles where the groups have to establish the identity of the mystery individual.

Task 5

This activity involves the decoding of sentence anagrams and the creation of sentences. I call it *Figure it out*. Firstly, the learners, working in pairs, are given a sheet containing eight sentence anagrams. Each sentence has either the copular or substantive verb in a positive, negative or interrogative mode embedded in a selection of nouns, adjectives and

prepositions. Six of the sentences can be correctly reassembled while one of them is an anagram of an incorrect copular sentence. The learners' task, having rearranged the other sentences, is to discuss among themselves why they believe this sentence to be incorrect and suggest an appropriate replacement. The second part is again a paired activity and involves an opportunity to create six meaningful sentences selecting one item from at least four of the five available columns in a table and arranging them correctly. There is a column of nouns, a column of proper nouns, two columns of verbal particles and a column of adjectives. Each sentence had to be accompanied by a translation into English of what they intend the sentence to mean. The table to be used is given below.

Verbs	Proper Nouns	Adjectives	Miscellaneous	Nouns
Is	Roy Keane	gránna	an	áit
Ní	Fraincis	conspóideach	na	duine
An	Nua Eabhrac	clúiteach	iad	peileadóir
Tá	Ferrari	tabhachtach	é/í	gluaisteán
Níl	Taoiseach	daor	tú	ábhar
An bhfuil	múinteoirí	spéisiúil	mé	ainmhí
Is	tíogar	deas	an	sábháilte

3.3 Conceptual Evaluation of the Tasks

Henry Widdowson views the pragmatics of pedagogy as 'the working out of a reflexive, interdependent relationship between theory and practice, between abstract ideas deriving from the various areas of enquiry and their actualisation in the achievement of practical outcomes"(1990, p.30). He goes on to claim that this relationship is reciprocal by nature and can only be realised in the act of teaching. The reciprocity reveals itself in that "it provides for the possibility of improved techniques for bringing about learning [and that it also] provides a rationale whereby such techniques can be explicitly identified as exemplars of more general principles of teaching" (ibid., p.30). I have often witnessed teachers bursting through the staff room door entreating others for an activity that will get them through the last class on a Friday afternoon or indeed, any class for which they have had insufficient time to prepare adequately. As a language teacher, I have often given, and more often received ideas, games or activities that fellow language teachers have found useful in their classes. Eventually, such a common resource runs dry and we wait for some new activity booklet to come our way. Teachers are not required to sit down and analyse why these tasks are inherently so reliable in the language class. Similarly, we often share the same activities or tricks of the trade with the annual batch of trainee teachers. Coupled with the theoretically sound techniques that they receive at their training institution, trainee teachers become a testimony to the discoveries of yesteryear with little idea of how they may appropriate all this to the present and employ it to shape their own future. Such a situation can easily result in teaching stagnating into "a set of half-understood routines, performed irrespective of the conditions of the class or the needs of the learners" (Brumfit 1983, p.62). The 'reflexive, interdependent relationship' that Widdowson envisions, however, involves the teacher donning the mantle of researcher and confronting the practical problems in his classroom via the application of his conceptual evaluation of a theory and his subsequent empirical evaluation of the

techniques used in its actualisation. Where theory informs practice and practice informs theory, our understanding of the learning process can only deepen and a teacher's professional development can only be enhanced. The above tasks are the embodiment of underlying pedagogical theories that I have used to inform my practical approach to improving learners' ability to form and use the copula. It would be illogical to choose tasks that have their origins in interpretations of pedagogy to which I do not subscribe. I will now briefly outline some of the theoretical underpinnings to these tasks.

3.2.1 Social Theory of Learning

It is not realistic to expect to understand a failure to learn simply by examining current teaching practice, identifying its shortcomings and proposing the necessary modifications. Such an approach is predicated on the belief that there are pearls of irrefutable pedagogical wisdom out there awaiting discovery and that practitioners everywhere will live a far happier existence once they are unearthed. This is a cruel pipe dream. The reality is that "we can only study teaching in reference to learning, and we can only understand teaching if we understand learning"(Van Lier 1998, p.130). This apparent inseparability has cultivated a far more studied approach to comprehending what is actually occurring during the learning process. One of these approaches is the social-interactive view of learning. As a starting point, it contrasts the limited success of much formal learning, in a school for example, with the efficiency of developmental and experiential learning. There is a sense that the traditional language classroom with its emphasis on individual learning is not maximising the varying learning abilities of students. The social-interactive view advocates that "the natural mode of developmental and experiential learning is interaction with other people, and our capacity to learn on our own derives from experiences of learning with and from others" (Little 2000, p.7). In Chapter 2, we encountered Vygotsky's contention that learning is fundamentally a social process. The principle that we can learn but little initially without help from others is captured nicely is his concept of the 'zone of proximal development' which is defined as

> The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978, p.86)

Put simply, what my learners can do today with assistance, they will be able to do tomorrow on their own. On a broader note, in tandem with a development in linguistic ability through social interaction is a development in individual and social consciousness. Our capacity for 'inner speech' where language scaffolds our thoughts, is internalised via egocentric speech which in turn derives from our conversations with others i.e. 'social speech'. Van Lier 1998) cites Piaget:

> Yes, it's my mouth which gives me ideas.
> —How?
> It's when I talk my mouth helps me to think.
> —But don't animals have thoughts?

No, only parrots a little bit, because they talk a little.

(Piaget, 1951, quoted in Beard, 1969, p. 83)

Van Lier proposes a hierarchy of consciousness and notes how "language plays an increasing role as one moves up the hierarchy, and coincides with an increase in social activity" (ibid., p.133). In other words, the higher our level of consciousness, the higher our capacity for inner speech which, in turn, produces a higher capacity to think, analyse, reflect and act independently in whatever the social context. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to expect that our educational system would take whatever measures are deemed necessary and allow learners "to be the perceiving, thinking, acting and interacting persons that they have the right to be" (ibid., p.142). Sadly, this is not the case in the Irish secondary system, and both learners and the state are paying a heavy price. A report published on 17 July 2002 by the Education Research Centre at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, provides a clear illustration. It reports how 17 per cent of all university entrants leave without completing their course, while the figure rises to 42 per cent in the 13 Institutes of Technology. This amounts to an immeasurable level of disappointment for those learners and their families, not to mention the investment of state money that will not deliver the dividend forecast. In addition, some 35 percent of those surveyed revealed that they felt 'lost' on entering college. In response to the report, the editorial in the Irish Times pointedly asks whether the "Leaving Certificate— with its reliance on rote learning— [is] a poor preparation for third level" (Irish Times, 18 July 2002). In theory and in practice, this seems to be the case.

3.3.2 Scaffolding

Closely associated with a social-interactive view of learning and the zone of proximal development is the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding is essentially a metaphor for a form of social interaction where a more knowledgeable participant in a conversation can "create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (Donato 1994, p.40). An obvious example of such a more knowledgeable participant could be a parent, an adult, an elder sibling, a teacher and crucially for our purposes, a fellow learner. Given that the class that I chose has varying levels of attained competence in Irish, I knew that the chosen group tasks would encourage the more knowledgeable learners (quite often, the learners from the Gaelscoileanna) to function as co-teachers with me in the classroom. Donato goes on to cite Wertsch (1979a), who holds that a scaffolded performance "is a dialogically constituted interpsychological mechanism that promotes the novice's internalisation of knowledge co-constructed in shared activity' (ibid., p.41). There is an implication here, however, that scaffolding is only a short-term necessity and must be gradually dismantled as the individual internalisation takes place. A useful analogy is that of the child who initially learns to swim using a pair of armbands — the time eventually comes when the child has to do the doggy-paddle all on his own. If this stage is not reached, the more graceful motions of the backstroke and the crawl will prove unattainable. Bruner (1983) calls this process 'handover'. Task Five where learners had

to work in pairs as opposed to larger groups and the individual test at the end of the teaching week could both be viewed as the beginning of the handover process.

3.3.3 The Role of the Teacher as Mediator

Parallel to the theoretical approaches that inform my teaching and their surface representations in the form of tasks, is my own practical performance as the teacher. It may be frustrating for theoreticians and researchers, but the successful implementation of their efforts is dependent to a large extent on the pedagogical craft of the teacher. Ascribing the role of mediator to the teacher is in many ways a response to our changing understanding of the teacher's true role and a realisation that the term 'teacher' itself may well be too closely associated to a form of instruction that has proved inadequate to the needs of learners. The act of mediation is, to a certain extent, an act of intervention where from birth, a child's learning is moulded by the intervention of significant others, of more knowledgeable participants. Feuerstein (1980) refers to these significant others as mediators and "the experiences they provide as *mediated learning experience*s" (Williams & Burden 1997, p.67). Intervention must not be looked upon as a foolish intrusion that upsets some preordained process of evolutionary learning. To quote Widdowson:

> Most of human progress seems to have come about by making the contrary assumption that nature can be improved upon by artifice of one kind or another. Social institutions, including that of education, are set up to counteract the shortcomings of nature, to control and exploit it and turn it to human advantage. The very concept of pedagogy (whether defined as art or science) presupposes invention and intervention which will direct learners in ways they would not, left to their own devices, have the opportunity or inclination to pursue (1990, p.48).

Feuerstein's concept of mediation is an extension of intervention in that the learner is given a far more prominent role in the language learning process. Successful mediation must entail interaction, a degree of reciprocity and a gradual empowerment of learners to progress from one zone of proximal development to the next. In other words, where the desired dividend is that of a higher level of independent language proficiency, it is necessary to show a class that the return on their investment of time and energy depends greatly on how everyone (teacher and learners) works together. The basic transmission of information cannot suffice. In attempting to describe how mediation manifests itself, Feuerstein identifies twelve features, three of which are essential for all learning tasks: *significance*, a *purpose beyond the here and now* and a *shared intention.* By *significance*, Feuerstein is referring to learners being made aware of the personal value of the learning task. The cynic in me said that such an appreciation among learners of Irish would be hard to find, yet subsequent learner evaluations (see 4.2.2) happily proved me wrong. Admittedly, I was also sceptical of learners perceiving that the tasks would have *a purpose beyond the here and now* but their evaluations once again indicated that such a perception had occurred. Finally, the importance of establishing a *shared intention* where the intended purpose I had for the task was understood and reciprocated by the class

obliged me to use English. Where time was in limited supply, I had no other option. These fundamental features along with those of *sharing*, *challenge*, *awareness of change* and *control of own behaviour* were very much in mind as I prepared for my teaching week. I was hopeful that this week of tasks coupled with my style of teaching would result in an improvement on the level of performance that I observed during my first visit to the school in February 2002.

3.4 Inside the Classroom: My First Visit

I initially had to decide between a first-year class, a third-year class and a sixth-year class. In February, all three classes were given appropriate tests that aimed to measure their ability to use the copula. The data collected proved informative and offers an insight into the progression made by learners in their acquisition of the copula during the secondary cycle. Of this, more later (see 3.4.1). Nevertheless, given that I would require a full week's teaching later on in the year and that such a request would be unreasonable on any exam year (students sit state examinations in both third-year and sixth-year), I was left with no option but to choose the first-year class. The school is an all-boys secondary school located in a relatively affluent suburb on the western side of Cork City. It is not a fee-paying school. It has an extremely high reputation for academic achievement. Compared to other schools in which I have taught, it has a favourable disposition towards the Irish language that manifests itself in the conversational ability of teachers who teach subjects other than Irish. There were twenty-four learners in the chosen class, two of whom were absent on the initial day of testing. As described in Chapter Two, the boys come from traditional 'feeder schools' as well as a number from the nearby *Gaelscoil*. They are all between twelve and thirteen years of age and form one of the four mixed ability-classes in first year. Pupils who are particularly weak in any of the three core subjects, receive separate tuition for the first two years in the hope that the initial gap in ability will have been bridged by the time such students rejoin their classes at the beginning of third year. These students were not part of the experiment.

3.4.1 The Extent of the Problem

Before focussing on the initial test performance of the learners in first year, I should refer to the performance of the learners in third year and sixth year. The test given to the third-year class was exactly similar in format to the first-year test. The only difference was in the area of vocabulary where a wider range of nouns and adjectives was used. Instead of translating *it's a tree*, third-year learners had to translate *it's a beautiful day* etc. These testees did no better than I had expected. They had no trouble translating the sentences from Irish into English in section one and in section two their translation of sentences from English into Irish was superior to the performance of the first year learners. Twenty-two of the twenty-seven students identified *it's a beautiful day* as a copular sentence. However, this contrasted sharply with their ability to identify *it isn't a long story* as a negative copular sentence. Only six of the same group gave the correct answer, *ní* scéal (story) fada é'. The majority of the others produced the substantive *níl* as in *níl sé scéal fada. Finally, only nine of the class correctly translated the interrogative copular sentence *is it a nice place?* Similar to the previous sentence, the majority used the substantive, **an*

bhfuil sé áit deas. Suffice to say, most of the errors occurred in copular sentences with the substantive verb being overproduced to a large extent. The test for the sixth-year class differed considerably from the other two tests in that there was no translation of sentences from Irish into English. Instead, the test consisted of translating twelve sentences from English into Irish, six in the present tense, six in the past tense, with an equal distribution of copular/substantive verbal contexts. Their results were good on the whole. This was no more than expected, as this group was a very capable higher-level class. Nevertheless, they did display considerable weaknesses in particular copular contexts, the interrogative mode being very much to the fore. Only nine out of the twenty-three testees correctly translated the sentence *is it an effective process?* Worse still, only one learner correctly translated the question *was it a good party?*. The most common error again was **an raibh sé cóisir maith,* an overproduction of the substantive or clear evidence of the copula being avoided with sentences such *an raibh an chóisir go maith?* which, though correctly formed, means *was the party good?*. A slight but important difference.

The performance of the first-year students was disturbing. Going by the performance of the older peers, it proved no surprise that they too had extreme difficulty with copular interrogative sentences. For example, only six of the learners could translate "is it a game?' It's worth looking at some of the other attempts.

3.4.2 Learners' Attempts

Is it a game? = An cluiche é?

(1) *<u>An bhfuil</u> sé cluiche...*typical incorrect use of <u>interrogative substantive</u>*

(2) *An bhfuil imir...*imir is the verb for 'to play*

(3) *Ca e a cluice.....*incorrect interrogative particle 'ca'.... possible transfer of indefinite article 'a' from English. No indefinite article in Irish.*

(4) *Tá sé an cluiche.....*incorrect use of substantive with definite article 'an'*

(5) *Ni an clithe.....*negative copular particle along with definite article 'an'*

(6) *Tá sé cluiche.....*incorrect use of positive substantive*

(7) *An bhfuil cluich ann....*is there a game there (substantive*)

(8) *An bhfuil an cluiche.....*is the game (substantive)*

As already stated in Chapter 1, only six of the class of twenty-two could translate the copular *it's a tree*, while no more that two students could correctly translate *it isn't a house*. More revealing still is the difficulty this group of learners had translating some of

the sentences from Irish into English in section one of the test. Take the copular sentence *ní bróg í*, which means *it isn't a shoe*. Here are some of the learners' offerings:

(1) They aren't shoes
(2) No shoes
(3) I have no shoes
(4) It a *doesent have a shoe
(5) She has no shoe
(6) No shoe
(7) She doesn't have a shoe
(8) He doesn't have shoes
(9) It's not broken

From any perspective, this is dispiriting stuff. Eight years of formal learning and this is the progress made. Sensationalism, however, is not what is required here. Instead, the need for analysis is more urgent than ever. Our first task is to examine the tests used to elicit this data.

3.5 Test Reliability

Any discussion on the reliability of these tests must be done against the reality of what Alan Davies (1990) calls "the centrality of uncertainty" in language testing. Moreover, "any language test is by its very nature inauthentic, abnormal language behaviour, for the task is not to give so much as to display knowledge" (Spolsky 1985, p. 31). These are two considerable and ever-present problems when dealing with reliability. Throw in the numerous affective factors that influence adolescents and one can see why the pivotal role that state examinations play in shaping learners' futures and their current format in particular, are so regularly criticised. Nevertheless, our tasks as test users is to remove to the extent that it is possible potential sources of error and close the gap between a candidate's test score and his true score/ability. Ideally, I would have wished to make the test longer, yet I was aware from experience that despite having received the bi-directional translation of all the words on the test, the learners would still be facing a considerable challenge. As mentioned in Chapter One, not one of the learners' many questions referred to how they should deal with the verb 'to be'. They didn't seem to regard it as a potential obstacle, unlike some of the nouns. In addition, candidates are highly constrained. Firstly, they must attempt all parts of the test. Secondly, the test allows for only a well-defined set of possible correct answers. This ensures a high level of objectivity. The test specifications and instructions are sufficiently rigid that the learners will be obliged to display their knowledge of the copula and the substantive. Independent scoring by a fellow colleague would also strengthen the scoring reliability. While learners would be familiar with the classroom setting, they would, admittedly, be unfamiliar with the novel format of the test. Indeed, it is probable that they would have no experience of such a test and/or that they would never have been tested on this grammatical feature. Nevertheless, the cycle where what is not tested is not taught must be broken at some stage.

3.5.2 Test Validity

"Validity is an overall evaluative judgement of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of interpretations and actions based on test scores and other modes of assessment" (Messick 1996, p.245). The following will show that while the test may be deficient in certain aspects of validity, its overall validity appears sound. Despite the serious attacks that have been made on psychometric testing over the years, one of the main reasons why indirect system-referenced tests have survived to this day is that they have a high level of face validity. Going on personal experience, one of the first questions I am always asked when distributing something new to my learners is, "What's this for?" It is an indication of learners' intrinsic curiosity to know what it is they're actually doing. However, I could see no way of ensuring high face validity, i.e. the test appears to measure what it is supposed to measure. From experience, I knew that there was little point in informing learners that I would be testing their ability to use the two verbs for 'to be' in Irish when the majority would have had no idea as to what I was actually referring. Expecting learners to make an immediate association between a sheet with twelve sentences requiring translation and two verbs, their explicit knowledge of which was decidedly foggy, was an unlikely outcome. Content validity is established in the correlation of test specification with test content. The test construction cannot be operationalised in the absence of test specification and this was identified right from the beginning. Again, the test has high content validity as every one of the twelve sentences requiring translation contains sentences that can have but one verb: either the verb 'to be' in English or the copula/substantive in Irish. Were one to take the Junior Certificate as the criterion performance which examines the writing, reading and listening skills of the learner, this test could only provide a certain predictive validity as to how the learners would fare. It may indicate a higher awareness of form and perhaps grammatical accuracy yet any other predictions made would be tentative. Remembering though, that our concern here is testing learners' ability to form and use the copula and the substantive verb in the appropriate contexts, both sections of the test can claim to have a reasonable level of construct validity.

3.6 Summary

I began this chapter with a description of the five tasks that I believed would prove effective in helping learners to improve their levels of competence in forming and using the copula in the appropriate contexts. Such accuracy, I claimed, could only be achieved through communicative group tasks that had sufficient grammatical salience while also providing for useful contrasts to be made between the copula and the substantive verb. Furthermore, I stressed the importance of tasks being the "enactments of ideas previously subjected to appraisal which provides them with a rationale" (Widdowson 1990, p.48). For me to act as an effective mediator, I needed to know that these tasks were underpinned by pedagogical principles of theory that would allow for alternative realisations appropriate to the particular instructional setting. Crucially, I needed to have faith in these principles. The search for these tasks originated in part from a visit I paid my own secondary school where I tested three classes on their ability to recognise and

use the copula. The results strongly confirmed what I myself had experienced as a teacher of Irish — that learners are having immense difficulty in mastering this fundamental verb in the Irish language. Equipped with my tasks and thoughts, I returned to the same school where I taught the aforementioned first-year class for a week. Chapter Four begins with a reflective summary on my time there.

Chapter 4: Looking Back

4.1 Introduction`

Chapter Three described in detail the tasks that I had chosen to instruct the copula during a teaching week in May 2002. It also included an appraisal of the pedagogical principles that underpinned the same tasks as well as the theories of learning that inform my performance as a teacher. This chapter begins with a reflective account on my week spent working with these tasks. An analysis of the results from the two post-tests, tests that were given to measure the effectiveness of these tasks, follows. The chapter is followed by an overall conclusion which positions this study in the wider context of incorporating such FonF tasks into the daily practices of Irish language teachers nationally.

4.2 Reflections From the Classroom

There were occasions during this week when I couldn't help but question the benefits that these learners were deriving from these tasks. While they seemed to enjoy working in groups, it was clearly a novel experience for them and they seemed to need the regular affirmation/intervention of their teacher. I had the impression that some would have been more comfortable had I assumed a more authoritarian role during the lessons. Their responses ranged from opting out and doing their own thing to engaging in harmless fooling. Nevertheless, they appeared happy to see me every day as they began to realise that this class would be different, involve no textbooks and crucially, from their perspective, no homework. It had been my intention to give a small amount of relevant homework every night that would reinforce what they had learned during the lesson that day. Monday night's homework involved writing an alternative description of the picture they had created as a group during the lesson. The following day, well over half of the pupils presented no homework whatsoever, claiming that they hadn't understood my instructions. Some of them were genuine while others were clearly trying their luck. In retrospect, it was a poorly thought-out piece of homework. In effect, I was asking students to write a description of a picture they didn't have in their possession using verbal constructions with which they were only partially familiar. I was angry with myself and yet I realised that chasing after pupils' homework for the coming week was not the reason I was here. To be truthful, I was expecting a lot from teenagers to attend diligently to the homework given by me when we hardly knew each other, when we had no relationship worth talking about. Ultimately, I needed their co-operation in these tasks, I needed them to be on my side. As a result, I made a decision that homework would take no further part in these lessons.

My decision to take the class in the middle of May proved ill-judged also. Traditionally, it is a time when the school year is winding down, when preparations are underway for summer house exams and when extra-curricular activities reach a conclusion. The net effect of this was that I lost one whole class due to a mountaineering day-out for all the first years, a portion of another lesson due to an inter-class general knowledge quiz which went over time, while a handful of learners had to miss another lesson due to a first-year soccer league final. Thankfully, I was given permission to stay until the following Monday, when I gave a double class. Throughout the week, there were times where I literally yearned to stop the tasks, brandish my stick of chalk and remove all confusion once and for all. And yet, these tasks, in effect, existed to offer an alternative approach to teaching the copula and compensate for the inadequacies of years of chalk and talk. To that extent, I too shared the discomfort of some of my learners. I knew from experience that I could give a class on the copula in a manner where both I and my learners could revert to more recognisable roles, where silence would be golden, and where I would have a far stronger impression that something of substance had been covered. Hence my moments of doubt after each lesson. It wasn't a case of not being at ease with the theory behind the tasks. It was more a measure of how quickly (three years) a teacher's own manner of teaching can fossilize and resist change. Another point worth mentioning is the level of target language use inside the classroom. I initially noticed how well-disposed they were to Irish being the main medium of instruction during the lessons. Few pupils, however, were brave enough to ask me a question in Irish. Moreover, not once did I hear any Irish being spoken during group work. This did not surprise me in the slightest, and while unfortunate, it did not prevent peer learning taking place. Given the time constraints, I felt I had no option but to use a certain amount of English in explaining the objectives of each task for the weaker learners. In addition, the group reflections at the end of each class were all carried out through English, but as was the case with the tasks, there was evidence of an appreciation of the learning experience. Of this, more later (see 4.2.2).

Task 1 (p.39) was certainly a success in getting learners to use the copula and the substantive. The main strength of the task is that it allows for alternative group and individual story-lines to narrate what is actually unfolding in the picture. Some of the groups produced bizarre pictures in the second part of the lesson. All of the speakers elected to describe their respective group's picture were ill at ease as they stood in front of the class. Overall though, the lesson was a useful and active introduction to the copula and how it contrasts with the substantive.

Task 2 (p.41) started well but gradually went downhill. The students were keen to be assigned their new identities and eagerly participated in the first two stages of the task. As the demands on their memory increased, many lost interest. While those learners who volunteered to mime some different occupations did so with enthusiasm, the lesson had irretrievably lost its momentum. A disappointment on the whole.

Of all the tasks, Task 3 (p.42) was the one that excited me most. I really felt that this was a task that would engage the whole class. Due to poor organisation on my part, however, the first part of the lesson started in a rather disorderly fashion as some of the envelopes

contained more slips of paper than others, which the learners were very quick to spot. Trying to work out which sentences had been included twice or which had been omitted proved very time-consuming and was a source of considerable embarrassment to me as the class waited for their 'teacher' to come to grips with his own lesson. Eventually, the groups were able to go about rearranging the slips of paper in the correct order and understand the joke. Despite having provided the translations of the more difficult words, certain groups had considerable difficulty in getting the general message of some of the sentences and therefore produced rearranged texts that only added to their confusion. Looking back, I probably should have informed the pupils which of the slips were to be the starting and concluding sentences in the text. In general, however, there were many examples of co-learning among the groups, all of whom eventually managed to reassemble the original joke. The learners had little bother in locating the grammatically incorrect sentences, e.g., **tá* (substantive) *sí áit shuaimhneach*. They all knew what the correct answer (*is* (copula) *áit shuaimhneach í*) should be, yet not one could tell me why this was so. More than anything, they seemed to lack any metalinguistic awareness that could support their intuitions. A demanding yet worthwhile task.

Task 4 (p.44), due in all probability to its familiarity, was the easiest of all the tasks to manage. It ran very smoothly. Little was asked of the groups save to correctly form an appropriate clue using either the copula or the substantive in rotation. The task proved conducive to independent teamwork and was perhaps one of the more enjoyable tasks during the week. The set of clues referring to Damien Duff, as shown in Chapter Three, is a good example of the learners assigning the correct functions to the copula and the substantive. At the end of the lesson, I volunteered to sit at the top of the room and had to try and discover my new identity within ten questions. I failed, to their great satisfaction, and turned to see the name of Kylie Minogue scrawled on the blackboard. Teenage priorities indeed!

The fifth task (p.45), involving pair-work, was unfortunately a rushed affair. This was due to the aforementioned extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, as the pupils created their own sentences from the word table and translated them accordingly, there was an overall sense of progress being made.

4.2.1 Recasting as Focus on Form

A word needs to be said concerning the manner in which I dealt with mistakes produced orally by the learners during the lessons. Given that the tasks used were both communicative in nature and grammatically salient, I needed to identify a FonF procedure that would not hinder the 'flow' of the lesson. There are those who argue against interrupting the learner during communication, believing, not without reason, that these approaches may constitute a gradual return to grammar-based teaching methodologies. The tasks that I chose sought no such return. That said, I felt I needed a method that would allow me to effectively draw attention to the learner's error within a communicative task, a method that had a theoretical basis. Alerting learners to unacceptable utterances in the target language is often referred to as negative evidence. Traditionally, negative evidence was narrowly defined as the explicit prohibition or

correction of child language. Recently, negative evidence has been reconceptualised "in a manner that is more consistent with the data on child-directed discourse" (Doughty & Varela 1998, p.117). Furthermore, much research has investigated the correlations, if any, between negative evidence and subsequent language acquisition. Doughty & Varela cite three of the resultant findings. Firstly, Bohannon & Stanowicz (1988) found that adults are more likely to provide recasts of ill-formed utterances containing only one error than those with many. Considering that many of my learners' errors fall under this category, such a finding is encouraging. Secondly, the same study found that adults are "quite likely to provide specific contrastive evidence by giving exemplars (in their recasts) of the correct syntactic form or pronunciation immediately after the child error has been uttered" (ibid., p.117). Naturally, establishing that negative evidence is provided doesn't necessarily establish its usefulness in language acquisition. Doughty and Varela again cite the findings of Bohannon & Stanowicz (1988) as well as (Farrar 1992), which revealed children's sensitivity to parental feedback in that they are "more likely to repeat recasts than repeat adult repetitions" (ibid., p.117). Where children both notice and make use of parental recasts and where such recasts do not impede the communicative interaction between parent and child, we find a basis for predicting that recasting may be a highly appropriate FonF procedure that dovetails nicely with the tasks chosen. Therefore, in Task 1 for example, a learner describing his group's picture who produced an error such as * *níl* (substantive) *sé gluaisteán nua* for *it's not a new car* was regularly provided with a recast by me using the copular *ní gluaisteán nua é.* I didn't offer recasts in response all the errors made during the tasks as I felt that such an approach would have been excessive. In general, for every five errors, I gave three recasts.

4.2.2 Learner Reflections

The ability to detach yourself from your own work and reflect on the purpose, progress and manner of your learning is something which can only be developed gradually over a considerable period of time. Any attempt to encourage my learners to become reflective in their learning must be seen in this context. The first four of the five teaching classes— the other class was reserved for the post-test— involved the class being arranged in a U-shape formation where I tried to elicit oral reflections on what they thought was the purpose of the tasks. The final teaching class required the learners to reflect in groups and provide written answers (see Appendix 6) to reflective questions such as those recommended by Dam (1995)— *what are we doing?, why are we doing it?, how are we doing it*? and *what do we do next?* Firstly, it would be fair to say that the class had little idea of their roles when we arranged ourselves in a circle at the end of the first lesson. It was clear that they had never been encouraged to offer their assessment of a lesson, particularly in the presence of a teacher. Secondly, to find themselves encouraged to speak in English must also have been slightly odd. Nevertheless, regardless of the language chosen to scaffold their thoughts, these reflective sessions were decidedly difficult to manage. Many of the learners saw it as an opportunity to switch off, as if the analysis of their learning had no personal relevance to them. Others were simply too shy to offer an opinion. In truth, I found that I had to continually drive this process of reflection forward. Thankfully, however, there were pupils who had the confidence to contribute and assess the purpose and overall effectiveness of the tasks. These were the

same learners who could identify a significance and an overall purpose in their work during the tasks. Some of their opinions are worth quoting.

At the end of the first lesson, when asked what we were doing, some of the learners remarked that I was teaching them 'basic stuff', 'everyday Irish' and 'necessary Irish'. Pointedly, one learner held that the reason they were involved in these tasks was that my job 'was to see how bad we are at Irish'. Another learner opined that I was 'forcing them to speak Irish'. There was a realisation among some of the apparently more able learners that I was trying to show them that 'there are two *to be's* in Irish' yet few were subsequently able to clarify the contexts in which one was used as opposed to the other.
The written group reflections also produced a few interesting insights into the learners' collective mindsets. In answer to the first question, *what are we doing?*, one of the responses was: 'Irish in school. The verb to be. There are two ways of writing it. tá and is'. Such a response indicates how writing offers itself as a tool to learners to introspect on the language being acquired. As Olson states: "Writing systems, then, do represent speech, but not in a way that is conventionally held. Far from transcribing speech, writing systems create the categories in terms of which we become conscious of speech" (1995, p.119). Another group, in reply to the same question, said that 'we are learning how to start sentences'. As regards the fourth question, *how else could we do it?*, the responses included: 'through English and games', 'with fun', and 'learn it off, stamp it into our minds. Make us learn it and if we are wrong we get detention'! All in all, these few reflections are those of young learners, products of a system where reflection and introspection are not highly prized. Still, they seem to suggest an appreciation on the part of the learners for the basics, the necessities of the language and their intrinsic wish to master them. The copula is one of these necessities.

4.3 Post-Test Results

The data needed to analyse the effect of FonF on learners' development in using and forming the copula was collected via a post-test immediately set following the week of instruction in May 2002 and a delayed post-test carried out almost four months later in September 2002 as the learners returned from their summer break. The test was unchanged in both format and content from the pre-test back in February 2002. It should be stated, however, that on no occasion, either after the pre-test or the initial post-test were the learners given the correct answers to the test. Nor were the learners given any indication regarding their individual performances in the tests. Indeed, such information could not have been provided since all the tests were completed anonymously. Nevertheless, the class was informed, prior to the delayed post-test, that they had improved significantly following the week of instruction. In addition, I purposely told them that the aim of the delayed post-test was to examine the extent to which learners had maintained the gains they had made before the summer holidays.

4.3.1 Statistical Analysis

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2 (pp.70-1), the changes in overall class scores, from pre-test to initial post-test, are highly encouraging. In particular, the gains made in the

copular sentences in section two of the test provide initial indications that these FonF tasks have been highly effective. For example, where only six of the twenty-two learners present on the first day could correctly translate the sentence *it's a tree*, no less than twenty-one were successful in its translation following their week of task group work. Even more pronounced is the gain made in the translation of the copular sentence *it isn't a house*. In the first test, all but two failed to correctly translate the sentence. In May, this figure had increased to seventeen of the twenty-four learners present. In short, there were impressive gains right across the board. One interesting exception was the learners' performance in translating the negative substantive *it isn't in the countryside*. Here, the class's score actually decreased following instruction. Not surprisingly and in some ways pleasingly, the errors made were mostly those of copular overproduction. While incorrect in their application, the learners were revealing that the once unfamiliar copula was beginning to register with them. Ultimately though, there can't be too much satisfaction in witnessing an improvement in learners' performance directly after a full week of pre-prepared tasks that had but one purpose: the learning of the copula. It proves very little. The potential value of these tasks could only be gauged with a delayed post-test.

In truth, the delayed post-test results as recorded in the same Tables are very positive. Despite almost a four month gap and with the adventures of a whole summer behind them, the learners maintained the gains made in some areas, retained an albeit lesser improvement in others and appeared to actually register slight improvements in some of the interrogative sentences. Returning again to the first sentence in section two —*it's a tree*— twenty-one of the twenty-four learners produced the correct copular translation. This equals their performance in the first post-test. Recall that only six of the same group of learners could successfully do this back in February. Looking at the sentence *is it a game?*, seventeen of the class were correct in their translation, which is a decrease of four from the first post-test. The score is still encouraging, given that only six learners were correct in the pre-test. The biggest decrease was to be seen in the translation of the negative copular sentence *it isn't a house*. Here, the old habits, of reverting to the substantive **níl sé teach* as opposed to the copular *ní teach é*, re-emerge. While the class's score fell by ten from seventeen to seven, only two learners were capable of translating this same sentence in the pre-test. Nevertheless, coupled with the very poor scores recorded by the sixth-year group in translating similar sentences, there is a clear suggestion that negative copular sentences in both the present and the past tense are more difficult to acquire in the classroom setting. The sole decrease observed in the immediate post-test in the translation of the substantive sentence *it isn't in the countryside* was no longer evident in the delayed post-test. Indeed, the learners increased their score from ten to seventeen, a score higher than the score of thirteen recorded in the pre-test. More surprising are the three slight increases recorded in section one of the test where the sentences are translated from Irish into English, the section where learners in all three classes performed relatively better. An increase of one was recorded in the positive copular sentence *is ceapaire é* (it's a sandwich) and the positive interrogative *an leabhar é?* (is it a book?). Moreover, the learners' score increased by three in the substantive question *an bhfuil sé leadránach?* (is it boring?). In short, the scores attained in the delayed post-test tend to suggest that the learners did benefit from their week of FonF tasks and that these benefits have, to a considerable degree, remained with them.

Table 1: First-Year Test and Overall Group Scores

	Correct		
Section 1:			
	PRT	**POT**	**DPOT**
Translate the following sentences:	Feb (22)	May (24))	Sept. (24)
1. Is ceapaire é _____	17	**22**	23
2. Tá an fheoil go deas	17	**23**	22
3. Ní bróg í.	10	**17**	17
4. Níl sí daor	17	**22**	21
5. An leabhar é?	13	**23**	24
6. An bhfuil sé leadránach?	18	**21**	24
Section 2:			
Aistrigh na h-abairtí seo a leanas:			
1. It's a tree (copula) _____	6	**21**	21
2. The tree is big (substantive)	18	**23**	19
3. It isn't a house (copula)	2	**17**	7
4. It isn't in the countryside (substantive)	13	**10**	17
5. Is it a game? (copula)	6	**21**	17
6. Is the game over? (substantive)	14	**22**	23

Note: Correct indicates correct choice between substantive and copula

. PRT=Pre-Test
POT=Post-Test
DPOT=Delayed Post-Test

Table 2: First-Year Test and Overall Percentage Scores

	Correct %		
Section 1:			
	PRT	**POT**	**DPOT**
Translate the following sentences:	Feb (22)	May (24)	Sept. (24)
1. Is ceapaire é _____	77	**92**	96
2. Tá an fheoil go deas	77	**96**	92
3. Ní bróg í.	45	**71**	71
4. Níl sí daor	77	**92**	88
5. An leabhar é?	59	**96**	100
6. An bhfuil sé leadránach?	82	**88**	100
Section 2:			
Aistrigh na h-abairtí seo a leanas:			
1. It's a tree (copula) _____	27	**88**	88
2. The tree is big (substantive)	82	**96**	79
3. It isn't a house (copula)	9	**71**	29
4. It isn't in the countryside (substantive)	59	**42**	71
5. Is it a game? (copula)	27	**88**	71
6. Is the game over? (substantive)	64	**92**	96

Note: Correct indicates correct choice between substantive and copula

. PRT=Pre-Test
POT=Post-Test
DPOT=Delayed Post-Test

4.5 Summary

I began this chapter with a look back on my experiences while teaching these tasks to the first-year learners. It was a week which, with better planning, could have gone a lot more smoothly. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable experience overall and seems to have been appreciated by the learners. While learners had clearly little experience of reflecting on the learning process, they did indicate that what they were learning was basic and more importantly, necessary. This appreciation of mastering the fundamentals of any language and the potential utility of these tasks is reflected nicely in the promising post-test and delayed post-test results. Ultimately, they show learners' ability to form and use the copula approaching the correct usage levels of the more favoured substantive verb.

Conclusion: The Wider Context

This brief study owes its origins to a learning problem that continues to frustrate both teachers and learners in the Irish language classroom. My experience as an Irish teacher has made me acutely aware of this problem. The aim of this study was to investigate the potential effectiveness of a series of group tasks, designed *a priori* "to draw learners' attention precisely to a [particular] linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand" (Doughty & Williams 1998, p.3). These tasks with their incorporation of an implicit FonF technique have produced promising results. Ultimately, however, there are broader questions that need to be answered before any set of principles, concerning the instruction of the copula, can be safely realised. These questions form the basis of Doughty & Williams's (1998) book, *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition.* While drawing mostly from the experiences of EFL/ESL classes, the following questions remain highly relevant to teachers of Irish everywhere:

(i) Why focus on form?

As has been argued in Chapters Two and Three, there is a strong case for the inclusion of some form of grammar instruction in language pedagogy. Where the majority of learners' exposure to the target language occurs within a classroom setting, the need to maximise the effectiveness of the learning process becomes even greater. This is the task facing teachers of Irish. In this regard, some teachers are misguided in their belief that their learners will somehow manage to pick up the more complicated grammatical features of the language simply through exposure. Throughout this study, I have argued that learners need to be able to correctly form and use the copula. The only means whereby the copula will be used is through written and oral communication. If communication is all we seek, then where does the need to achieve target-like second language ability come from, why all this bemoaning of falling standards and poor grammar? As I have stated, communication needs to co-exist with grammatical accuracy. Indeed, the quality of communication is quite often determined by the level of grammatical accuracy. Grammar is the liberating key to a language and teachers need to present it as such. Doughty and

Williams hold, quite logically, that "leaving learners to discover form-function relationships and the intricacies of a new linguistic system wholly on their own makes little sense" (ibid., p.11). Focus on form as employed in the tasks designed in this study, appears to facilitate learners in developing control of both form and function. It is a worthy and promising compromise.

(ii) When should teachers focus on form?

This is an issue that requires the input of both primary and secondary teachers in Ireland. Our farcical assessment procedures, described in Chapter Two, are a salutary lesson on the need for co-operation. Should FonF be the responsibility of secondary language teachers as they seek to build on a communicative competence that should be well-developed throughout the primary cycle? Or should FonF extend into the primary sector as well? Within these two tiers of schooling, should this approach to language teaching be employed on a continuous basis or should it be used at particular stages during the two cycles? These questions, however, can only be addressed when teachers are explicitly aware of their own approach to the language teaching process. Do teachers use an analytic or synthetic approach to organise their language teaching? Michael Long (1991), who is credited with rekindling interest in FonF, states that FonF doesn't imply that the isolation of linguistic units should form the basis for the organisation of language instruction and that the primary focus should always be on the discovery of meaning. Admittedly, the tasks used in this study were preconceived and did have a formal linguistic focus. Crucially, however, the games could only be successfully operationalised through the negotiation of meaning. Moreover, these tasks had been designed based on prior elicitation of learners' needs and had not been imposed by some external syllabus. Many of the current textbooks available to teachers of Irish do subscribe, consciously or unconsciously, to a synthetic syllabus where the expectation is that learners will gradually piece together a number of isolated linguistic items for communicative use. Yet, there is sufficient evidence in SLA that language learning "is not a process of accumulating entities" (Long & Robinson 1997, p. 16). Indeed, such an synthetic approach "either ignores language learning processes or tacitly assumes a discredited behaviourist model" (ibid., p.16). Chapter Three revealed the more interactive and more centralised role that the learner has to play in the learning process. Such findings must inform the design of future Irish language textbooks, syllabi and teacher training programmes.

(iii) Which forms should teachers of Irish focus on?

The copula is surely not the only grammatical feature in Irish that may be more efficiently learned using FonF tasks. Personally, I would be inclined to line up the usual suspects like the genitive case, nominal mutations, the counting rules, relative clauses and prepositions/prepositional pronouns. Yet, such an approach immediately assumes that the more difficult linguistic items are those most suitable to FonF, that they are all equally amenable to such an approach and this may well not be the case. Furthermore, is it safe to suggest that the effectiveness of FonF in the classroom differs due to the inherent complexity of the chosen linguistic items? The scope of this study has prevented me from

enquiring into the individual interlanguages (ILs) based on the errors (see Appendix 5) made during the tests. Such an investigation, into the status of these items in learners' ILs, needs to be undertaken. Irish teachers could benefit greatly from a forum where such matters could be discussed. In this regard, Comhar na Múinteoiri Gaeilge (Teachers of Irish Association) has been a great source of professional support for practitioners and could well provide such a forum. In addition, contributions from the Department of Education and Science along with textbook designers would be extremely helpful.

(iv) Is focus on form beneficial in all classroom contexts?

Coming from a secondary school background where Irish is taught as a subject only, it is easy to forget that there are other classroom contexts which may or may not be conducive to FonF tasks. One must consider the large number of adult classes, primary-level Gaelscoileanna, Irish-medium secondary schools, university lectures and tutorials and the different proficiency levels and learner needs evident in each setting. In particular, where an entire curriculum is delivered through Irish, it is practical that teachers of science, history and metalwork provide FonF tasks to their learners? These, and many other questions must provide the parameters within which Irish language advocates of FonF are to frame their proposals for the future.

Ultimately, true proficiency can only be judged in real-time communication and not from the results of written tests. Nevertheless, the results from this dissertation suggest that the tasks used do improve learners' ability to form and use the copula in suitable contexts and should be seen as a positive step towards the attainment of real-time proficiency in the long-term. These tasks incorporate an approach to learning which is both communicative in nature and grammatically salient, i.e. FonF. Moreover, it is an approach that appears highly appropriate to the linguistic needs of learners of Irish. Before FonF can be introduced into the communicative syllabi at both primary and secondary level, it must demonstrate its effectiveness and feasibility on a far broader and more comprehensive basis than this study can possibly offer. Nevertheless, if this study encourages other teachers as well as researchers to undertake further task design, it will have served a useful purpose.

Appendix One: Teacher Questionnaire.

Re: To determine the attitudes of teachers with regard to the teaching of the copula (an chopail) in Irish.

1. On a scale of 1-5, how do you judge the proficient use of the copula by learners in terms of attaining a mastery of Irish.

   No importance ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Essential

2. What methods do you use to teach the copula?

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. When should pupils be introduced to the concept of the copula?

_____
_____
_____

4. In general, do teachers devote sufficient time to the instruction of the copula?

_____
_____
_____

5. Do teachers sometimes avoid teaching the copula? If so, why?

_____
_____
_____
_____

6. Do current textbooks and teaching materials offer satisfactory support to both the teacher and the learner in dealing with the copula?

_____
_____
_____

7. To what extent are pupils entering secondary school aware that there are two verbs for “to be “ in Irish?

_____
_____

8. Were you ever taught the copula? If so, when and how was it presented to you?

_____
_____
_____
_____

9. What is the greatest difficulty for the student in the acquisition of the copula?

_____
_____
_____
_____

10. Given the reality that native speakers themselves occasionally use the substantive verb in technically copular contexts, should teachers insist on the correct use of the copula?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix 1: First-Year Test

Section 1: Translate the following sentences:

1. Is ceapaire é/*it's a sandwich.*

   _____

2. Tá an fheoil go deas/*the meat is nice.*

3. Ní bróg í/*it isn't a shoe.*

4. Níl sí daor/*it isn't dear.*

5. An leabhar é/*is it a book?*

6. An bhfuil sé leadránach/*is it boring?*

Section 2:Aistrigh na h-abairtí seo a leanas:

1. It's a tree. (copula)

2. The tree is big. (substantive)

3. It isn't a house. (copula)

4. It isn't in the countryside. (substantive)

5. Is it a game? (copula)

6. Is the game over? (substantive)|

Appendix Three: Third Year Test and Overall Class Results (27 learners)

Section 1: Translate the following sentences:	**Correct**
1. Is scannán maith é.	26
2. Tá an cluiche críochnaithe.	27
3. Ní nuachtán saor é.	22
4. Níl an teilifís ar siúl.	26
5. An bean álainn í?	19
6. An bhfuil an linn snámha ar oscailt?	27
Section 2: Aistrigh na h-abairtí seo a leanas:	
1. It’s a beautiful day.	23
2. The beach is packed.	26
3. It isn’t a long story.	6
4. The yard isn’t dirty.	24

5. Is it a nice place?	9
6. Is the computer broken?	24

Appendix Four: Sixth-Year Test and Overall Class Results (23 learners)

Translate the following sentences:	**Correct**
1. It is a national scandal (scannall).	23
2. The hospitals are in poor condition.	23
3. It isn't a fair fight.	15
4. The community isn't helping.	23
5. Is it an effective process.	10
6. Are Irish women happy these days?	23

****

7. It *was* a terrific goal.	18
8. The company was doing well.	23
9. It wasn't an easy test.	1
10. The laboratory wasn't safe.	22

11. Was it a good party? 3

12. Was the trip worthwhile? 23

Appendix Five: Learners' Interlanguage Errors

Note: The errors listed are taken from the first set of tests completed in February 2002. The general trend is of both copular and substantive verbal particles being used, sometimes all at once, in technically copular sentences.

Section 1: Errors from Sixth-Year Learners

(a) Translations of the sentence *it wasn't an easy test.* (copular sentence)
Correct answer: *Níor scrúdú éasca é.*

1. *Ní raibh scrúdú éasca í.
2. *Níorbh scrúdú éasca é.
3. *Níl scrúdú éasca a bhí sé.
4. *Ní scrúdú éasca ab ea é.
5. *Ba dheacair a bhí an scrúdú.

(b) Translations of the sentence *was it a good party?* (copular sentence)
Correct answer: *Ar chóisir mhaith í?*

1. *An raibh cóisir mhaith é?
2. *An cóisir maith é?
3. *An cóisir maith ab ea é?

(c) Translations of the sentence *is it an effective process?* (copular sentence)
Correct answer: *An proiséas éifeachtach é?*

1. *An bhfuil próiséas éifeachtach í?
2. *An bhfuil an próiséas éifeachtach atá ann?

(d) Translation of *it is a national scandal*. (copular sentence)
Correct answer: *Is scannall náisiúnta é?*

1. *Is scannall náisiúnta atá ann

(e) Translation of *it was a wonderful goal*. (copular sentence)
Correct answer: *Ba chúl iontach é.*

1. *Cúl sármhaith a bhí sé.

Section 2: Errors from Third -Year Learners

(a) Translation of the copular sentence *ní nuachtán saor é.*

1. The newspaper isn't free.
2. *No cheap newspapers.

(b) Translation of the copular sentence *an bean álainn í?*

a. She is a wonderful woman.
b. Is the woman beautiful?
c. She is a wonderful woman.

(c) Translation of *it's a beautiful day*. (copular sentence)
Correct Answer: Is lá álainn é.

1. *Is lá go maith atá ann.

(d) Translation of *is it a nice place?* (copular sentence)
Correct Answer: An áit dheas í?

1. *An bhfuil áit deas é.
2. *Is áit maith é?
3. *An raibh áit dheas é?
4. *An aít go breá?
5. *Is é áit deas.

(e) Translation of *is the computer broken?* (substantive sentence)
Correct Answer: An bhfuil an ríomhaire briste?

1. *An ríomhaire briseadh?
2. *An é riamhra briste?

Section Three: Errors from First-Year Learners

(a) Translation of copular sentence *is ceapaire é*
Correct Answer: It's a sandwich.

1. They are sandwiches

(b) Translation of copular sentence *an leabhar é?*
Correct Answer: Is it a book?

1. You have a book.
2. Do you have a book?
3. A book

(c) Translation of substantive sentence *an bhfuil sé leadránach?*
Correct Translation: Is it/he boring?

1. Boring?

(d) Translation of substantive sentence *níl sí daor*.
Correct Answer: It/She isn't dear.

1. It 's not a deer.
2. She isn't a deer.

(e) Translation of sentence *it's a tree*. (copular sentence)
Correct Answer: Is crann é.

1. *Tá an choill.
2. *Is sé crann.
3. *Tá an crann.
4. *Bhí sé crann.
5. *Tá a crann.

(f) Translation of sentence it isn't a house. (copular sentence)
Correct Answer: Ní teach é.

1. *Ní sé an teach.
2. *Níl teach.

Appendix Six: Learners' Reflection Sheet

Learner Reflection

1. What are we doing?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. Why are we doing it?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

3. How are we doing it?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. How else could we do it?

_____
_____

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