

# Marie Clay's Work in Irish

*Gabrielle Nig Uidhir, lecturer in Irish-medium Education, St. Mary's University College, Belfast*

Since my first contact with Professor Marie Clay in the spring of 2001, I have been quite overwhelmed by the honour of being permitted to work on her brilliant *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. Not only did Marie grant me permission to redevelop her work in Irish, but she provided me with support, guidance, wisdom, and inspiration at many critical moments. I was amused and appropriately jolted on several occasions by the sharp observations that she made in red ink on some of the early drafts that I sent her. Until the work was finally published in April 2007, I was always very sensitive to the onerous responsibility involved in this task. Marie had designed a literacy assessment tool that had been used internationally for over 30 years. It was truly excellent and reflected so many of Marie's own qualities—direct, precise, focus on detail and accuracy, perspicacious and there at its centre—a noble aim, empowering teachers to intervene in a really meaningful way on the behalf of children.

Marie believed in the dynamics of the support that people can give to each other. It was appropriate, therefore, that this redevelopment of Marie's work for Irish-medium teachers was carried out within a context of a support network. Firstly, participation in the Reading Recovery training programme in Belfast ensured that the work could draw upon the expertise and insights into early literacy development that Marie had shaped and shared with her

trainers. Secondly, partnership with Angela Hobsbaum at the Institute of Education, University of London, and the international members of the Comenius project, provided many stimulating, enjoyable, colourful opportunities for interacting and discussing the challenges involved in redeveloping the Observation Survey into Irish, Spanish, Danish, and Slovak. When Marie visited the group in London, she impressed me with her clear understanding of issues involved in a language with which she was unfamiliar (though maybe not entirely unfamiliar, as she was of Irish descent herself!). I asked her a specific question relating to the Letter Identification task. Marie responded by asking me a series of detailed questions about the Irish linguistic system and then gave her answer with decisiveness and certainty. I wanted to be like that! Indeed, I think that I will always aspire to emulate the fine qualities that I came to recognise in Dame Marie Clay.

On behalf of Irish-medium teachers and the thousands of children learning to read and write in Irish in their primary schools, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Marie. Until the publication of the *Áis Mheasúnaithe sa Luathliteartacht: Treoir Do Theagasc na Litearthachta* (ÁML = Observation Survey), there was no literacy assessment tool available to teachers that offered them a standard, well-tested means to profile children's early literacy achievement. Her contribution to the Irish-medium sector will only become

fully appreciated as this resource is introduced into schools throughout Ireland. It also paves the way for the introduction of Reading Recovery in Irish.

Marie's letters to me during the years of collaborating on the ÁML redevelopment project provided me with her commentary on the progress of the work. Her last letter remains truly precious. Therein she gave her final approval. Her generous words have meant more to me than any praise that I have ever received from anyone. I was pleased to have met the daunting responsibility, mentioned above. Marie asked her publishers to cite me as a co-author in this work. What an honour! It has been a real privilege to have been given the chance to work alongside Marie for this short while. She made a difference in the lives of so many people, influencing their views and sharpening their skills and understanding. As a role model, Marie will remain very much present among teachers, trainers, parents, and others who safeguard the interests of children.