

The Place of Irish in a Multilingual Environment

LEARNING OUTCOMES

This guide supports the teaching of all languages and is relevant to all learning outcomes across the three strands.

- Oral Language/Teanga ó Bhéal
- Reading/Léitheoireacht
- Writing /Scribhneoireacht



Integrating language learning to develop a multilingual environment

In an English-medium school, Irish is a language that most of the children, whatever their home language, will not have previously heard or used. In many cases, preschool or primary school is the first place that children hear instructions being given, questions being asked, and lessons being taught through the medium of Irish. Irish is, therefore, the language that most children will learn as a new language. In this way, it creates an equality between all pupils, whatever language they speak at home.

In a learning environment where Irish is used in a meaningful way by teachers and pupils, i.e., where it is used to address issues that are important and of interest, it can serve as a link between English and learners' home languages.

When learners experience Irish being used regularly and meaningfully in both formal and informal situations in school, it can begin to occupy a pivotal position in children's learning. It can act like a bonding agent for all the languages of the classroom including English (Little and Kirwan, 2019).

In a multilingual environment, all languages become equal in terms of when and how they are used. In this way, a plurality of languages can actually support a minority language like Irish, unlike a situation where there are only two languages, one of which is clearly in a dominant position.

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Positive outcomes for Irish in a multilingual learning environment

- Increased use of Irish in the school and experiencing Irish being used in meaningful situations, contributes to children's increased use of Irish. There are two considerations that are important for increased use of Irish by children, particularly indigenous Irish children. The first is crucial. It is the experience of hearing teachers using Irish meaningfully among themselves and also with children in the class, corridors, yard, etc. The second involves experiencing the confident way EAL children express themselves in their own language(s) and the manner in which they are affirmed and valued for this. Both these practices encourage spontaneous use of Irish by indigenous Irish children who

want to use it to express themselves in another language, often referring to Irish as 'my language'. It also allows them to perceive that Irish is a language that can be used for communication purposes just like all the other languages in the school.

- Irish can also serve as a link between English and other home languages. In an English-medium school Irish is the 'new' language common to all children, and can therefore be used as the mutual language for all.
- Access to two or more languages provides increased opportunity for developing language awareness across all topics of the Primary School Curriculum, e.g., **a dó, deux, dos; caballo, cavallo, capall**, etc. For this to happen, the capacity to express oneself in more than one language must be actively valued in the school.

- The status of Irish is raised when it is seen to be valued, is used meaningfully, and when it gives indigenous Irish children access to demonstrating their developing second language skills in an environment where such skills are valued as normal practice. Indigenous Irish children want to be able to do what their plurilingual peers can do, i.e., express themselves in their second language.



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Whole school approach to promote use of Irish in a multilingual environment

To support a whole school approach to promoting the use of Irish in a multilingual environment, schools can do the following:

- Teachers can use Irish informally with colleagues for purposes of communication.
- Teachers and older children can model the use of Irish in formal and informal situations for the benefit of younger children.
- Affirm attempts by children to use Irish, e.g., greetings in class, corridor, yard, etc.
- Use all school events as a vehicle to promote language use, e.g., school concert/ official opening, introductions made alternately in English or Irish and another home language.

- Encourage singing in Irish, English and home languages in class and school group situations.

Whole school approaches to promote the transfer of skills

To support a whole school approach to promoting the transfer of skills across languages, schools can do the following:

- Use multilingual displays and labels in the school (in English, Irish and home languages of each particular class).
- Display dual language work in English and Irish, or English/Irish and home language, e.g., children's writing, video and audio recordings.
- Involve children in the production of a plurilingual video about the school where children speak in English and Irish and home languages.

- Use common approaches, where suitable, to language teaching in both languages and include contributions from children in their home languages.
- Ensure that teachers engage in joint planning for adopting and developing cross-language initiatives and activities.
- Ensure that common terminology is adopted throughout the school in relation to concepts, terms and skills so that children are repeatedly exposed to the same terminology.
- Ensure that teachers are familiar with the gradual release of responsibility model where children are exposed to the modelled, shared, guided and independent phases of instruction.

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Effective conditions for the transfer of skills

- In predictable learning situations such as discussing daily weather/ roll call/ allocation of classroom tasks, undertake question and response in one language, e.g., Irish followed by similar question and response in English, followed by contributions from children in their home languages. This can become a daily practice to reinforce learning and can develop into a plurilingual exchange when children begin to play with the idea of asking a question in one language and answering it in another; substituting a word, phrase from another language, i.e., using all the languages in their repertoires.
- Children's implicit knowledge of language **must be activated** in

- order to make it explicit. This gives children the observational and analytical skills to increasingly refine and build their linguistic knowledge.
- Eliciting from children where they observe connections and similarities between Irish, English and their home languages. This approach encourages autonomous learning.
- Encouraging children to make explicit, where possible, the connections and similarities between languages.
- Providing children with adequate exposure to the second language, be that Irish or English.
- Exposing children to daily, meaningful using of Irish (second language) not only in teaching and learning situations but also among staff and older pupils. Informal use of Irish throughout the day.
- Teaching Irish through Irish in

schools in which English is the medium of instruction.

- Understanding of concepts and skills in L1.
- Opportunities for practice in L1 before L2.



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Using Irish in a multilingual environment

The following activity is an example of how a lesson on the topic of ‘greetings’ can be conducted to include all the languages of the classroom. It is likely that one of the children’s first encounters with the Irish language will have been the teacher’s use of the greeting ***Dia duit***. Linking this to children’s daily experience of what their mother/ father/ carer says when they meet the child after school helps to incorporate and root the new greeting ***Dia duit*** in the child’s experience. Asking for examples of greetings from the children will result in many additional ways being offered, e.g., ***hello*** (English); ***hallo*** (German); ***helló*** (Hungarian); ***ciao*** (Italian); ***cześć*** (Polish); ***bonjour*** (French); ***bom dia*** (Portuguese); ***dobry den*** (Czech); 你好 (Chinese); etc.

By drawing attention to greetings that sound alike, the teacher takes the first step in activating children’s awareness of the phonological similarities and differences between languages. The teacher cannot know, nor does s/ he need to know, all these languages. The children know them and will be happy to share them when they find themselves in a secure, nurturing environment.

In this way, all the languages of the classroom and all the languages that are known to individual children, become the stepping stone to allow access to and understanding of the new way to express a greeting, i.e., ***Dia duit***. Exercising these comparative skills leads to an important conceptual understanding for learners when they realise that a greeting conveys the same message regardless of the language being used. By incorporating

this awareness into an area that is meaningful for the children it is more likely to be readily understood. This process also leads to the development of curiosity about languages, questioning, reflective skills, and higher-order thinking.

The following activities are examples of **suggested activities** which can be adapted, according to children’s ability, **across languages** to enable children to transfer their skills and knowledge from their first language to a second and additional languages.

- Teachers can explicitly highlight the **conventions of print** across languages, by drawing children’s attention to left to right orientation, top to bottom orientation, front to back orientation and identification of the title, illustrations and author of texts. This can be done using large format books and picture

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books in both English and Irish. While reading large format books, attention can also be drawn to the similarities in punctuation – full-stop, capital letters, comma, question mark.

- **Phonological awareness** is the ability to recognise and use language aurally and orally. Early phonological awareness skills include being able to recognise, hear and distinguish words within sentences, syllables within words, rhyming words and words beginning with the same initial sound. Even very young learners can identify sounds used or not used in different languages. Playing with words and rhymes develops phonological awareness. Phonological awareness activities can be carried out interchangeably between English and Irish to highlight the transfer of phonological

awareness skills from English to Irish. *These include the following:*

1. **Identification of words within sentences:** Teacher says some words/short sentences. The child repeats each word, placing a counter into a box as each individual word is repeated, e.g., ***Tá mé ag rith*** (four counters are placed in the box).
2. **Syllable segmentation:** Recite simple poems and rhymes, asking children to tap their knees or clap on each syllable while they do so, e.g., ***Lámh, lámh eile, a haon, a dó***
3. **Rhyming words:** Prompt children to identify rhyming words in both English and Irish by using pictures or concrete objects. ***I'm thinking of a word that rhymes with 'bat'/Tá mé ag smaoineamh ar fhocal a bhfuil rím aige le 'lán'.***

4. **Initial sounds identification:** Using pictures or concrete objects, children identify words beginning with a variety of initial sounds. This activity can be carried out in English and Irish. ***Tá mé ag smaoineamh ar fhocal a thosaíonn le 'b'. Cad é?***
5. **Identify letter patterns in words where possible:** Create word families of words with the same endings e.g., ***_án, _ann/_eann.***
 - Use popular stories and **fairy tales** for literacy activities in both languages, e.g., ***Little Red Riding Hood/Cochailín Dearg.*** Engage the children in **similar activities** across languages, e.g., prediction, sequencing of events, character descriptions, drama activities, questioning. Make comparisons between the English and Irish versions of the story. Many children will know these stories in

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their home languages. Highlighting this and bringing it into the activities is a language awareness raising benefit for all pupils, e.g., comparing words used for colour, grandmother, walking in the woods, etc.

- Choosing a variety of **topics/ themes** and planning a variety of activities in both languages to develop the topic/theme, e.g., **my favourite toy**. Activities may include making a very short oral presentation, developing vocabulary and word lists and engaging in written activities in both languages. This can also include reference to home languages. There are benefits in the area of language awareness for all pupils.
- Engage children in the **Language Experience Approach**, which involves the children composing various sentences to form a story,

with the teacher acting as scribe. This can be carried out in both English and Irish and can be used for future reading material and oral language activities. Children can contribute orally in their home language and will be much more engaged in the story building activity if given this opportunity. This is another opportunity for language awareness for all children where comparisons are made between all languages.

- Engage children in the **writing process** in both languages as they are engaging with the various genres. It is important to reference the home languages even if children have not yet learned to read or write in them. In other words, the full linguistic repertoires of all children are continually activated, feeding into whatever activity is taking place. This

will involve children choosing topics, drafting, redrafting and presenting to an audience.

- **Free writing** sessions in English, Irish and home languages enable children to experiment with a variety of genres and gives them independence in **making choices** about topics to write about. These sessions also give children the opportunity to practise the skills of writing that have been explicitly taught to them during modelled, shared and guided writing sessions.
- Engage children in **language awareness activities** where children compare and contrast elements of English, Irish, and home languages, e.g., counting, days of the weeks, colours and counting.
- Explicitly teaching a range of **comprehension strategies** in English and Irish, e.g., making

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predictions, creating images. As children gradually begin to interact with and make meaning of text in English, these skills can be further developed in Irish and in home languages.

- Engage children in the **creation of dual language texts** with the guidance of the teacher (see below for description of suggested steps involved). Writing dual language texts requires children to compare expressions and structures in each language, thereby prompting transfer of knowledge and skills across languages. These texts can be used as a basis for future reading material and oral language discussions. The completion of a single dual language text may be completed over a period of time.

Creation of dual language texts using English, Irish and home languages

Teachers cannot take responsibility for teaching home languages. However, the outcomes for children can be very beneficial when parents and teachers cooperate in the task of developing children's literacy skills. Using the texts that have been created in school, children can be helped by their parents to produce dual language texts at home. Familiarity with the text roots the activity in what the child knows. Only the language, not the content, has to change.

Learning to read and write in the home language, using texts with which they are already familiar, provides the opportunity for the languages involved to support each other. Children whose home languages are neither English nor Irish can be encouraged to produce

their text in their home language too. Some will need help from parents to do this while others will already have begun learning to read and write in their home language either from parents or in weekend/ evening home language classes/ schools.

When children's home language is valued in school, using the home language can be a significant motivator for children.

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Being encouraged to read their dual language texts for their classmates provides great affirmation for learners and helps to build their confidence. Observing their peers reading and writing in two languages can be a powerfully motivating force for children who are currently monolingual. It also provides an excellent opportunity for developing language awareness when the teacher encourages children to try to attach meaning to sounds or recognise words/phrases from the context of the writing.

Children decide on a topic of their choice to write about and pick a title for their book. This can be done individually, in groups or with the aid of the teacher:

1. They plan for their writing in English, using brainstorming and mind mapping to create an outline of their story.
2. As they start to create the first draft of their story, children are encouraged to work in both languages. At this stage, children are guided by the teacher.
3. As the children create each page of the book, they write text in both English and Irish to convey similar meaning. In doing so, this may involve simplifying the language in the second language (L2). Initially, this process can be modelled by the teacher. Children can be guided through

the process of choosing words and using phrases of similar meaning in L2.

4. An important teaching point at this stage is avoiding literal translation between languages. Teachers can model how to phrase sentences of similar meaning in English and Irish, e.g., ***My favourite hobby of all is soccer/ Is maith liom sacar.***
5. The children then proof read the texts and are aided in the proof reading by teachers. They edit their work as necessary.
6. Each page is then re-drafted and revised again, editing text where necessary.
7. A final draft of the text is written.
8. Illustrations are added to each page.
9. A front cover and a back cover for the book are created.
10. Children plan a presentation for others. This involves reading the book in both languages, showing the illustrations and explaining the steps involved in creating the book.

** It is important to note that the level of teacher assistance required will vary depending on pupil needs and class level.*

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