

## DRAFT PRIMARY LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

It is a very positive development that we are heading in the direction of teaching languages in an integrated manner. Congratulations to all who have been involved in the process of bringing the draft document to this point.

The following comments are made in the spirit of making a positive contribution to the development of the document.

### Listening as a Skill in Language Learning

Research conducted on behalf of the NCCA, resulted in the publication of *Towards an Integrated Language Curriculum in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3 – 12) years*, J. Cummins and P. Ó'Duibhir (2012). This document specifically recommends *...in developing an integrated language curriculum in Ireland we would recommend largely the same structures and descriptors for teaching and learning all languages such as listening, talking, reading and writing* (2012: 70). The word *listening* appears very infrequently in the draft document. In no sense is it conveyed to the reader the importance of its function in the learning of language. It may be argued that the notion of the importance of listening is implied. As teachers, particularly as language teachers, we can never take such understanding for granted. There is much reference to use, production, imitation etc., but little reference to the importance of listening in language learning, whether that language is mother tongue or in relation to additional languages.

In English-medium primary schools, it is important to stress the need for good modelling of the Irish language. This concept is not innovative, in that *the most successful learners are likely to be those who are constantly interacting with and through the target language, receiving and expressing meanings that are important to them* (Little, 1991: 42).

If L1, L2, L3, etc. language learning is to be successful the four skills (above) are crucial, in addition to meaningful interaction. Unfortunately, research by Harris (2006) has drawn attention to the fact that competence of many teachers in the use of the Irish language is at a lower level than was previously the case. If we are to support the development and learning of Irish we need to address the issue of confident, competent use of the Irish language by those who are delivering it. This is an area that requires particular support.

This leads to the question of why the skill set that is required to learn language has been presented under three, rather than four areas, i.e., Oral, Reading, Writing (NCCA, 1999; Draft

doc., 2014). It is a matter of personal experience that when teachers are asked to explain what they understand by the word Oral in this context, the majority reply that it means *spoken* language. While reference to *éisteacht* was included in the 1999 Gaeilge curriculum the same place was not afforded to *listening* in the English curriculum. In our opinion, this was, and remains a serious omission in that it creates an underestimation of the importance of listening in the language learning process.

## The Common European Framework of Reference

The Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), in addition to the European Language Portfolio, is heavily referenced in the Cummins/Ó'Duibhir publication (2012: 87-89). It is pointed out that the CEFR and ELP, together provide *...a structure enabling children to be active participants in the learning process. These tools facilitate children in self-assessing their learning, in monitoring their progress, in setting future goals and in comparing and transferring their skills across languages* (2012: 88, 89). The CEFR is an ideal tool for language teaching in terms of planning, pedagogy and assessment. It is validated by the Council of Europe. It provides a common framework across cultures and languages for dealing with the skills, methodologies required for successful language teaching. It also provides for evaluation of users' levels of those languages. In fact, CEFR benchmarks, developed and validated specifically for EAL learners in Irish primary schools, in addition to the *My European Language Portfolio* (a model of the ELP developed by the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative and accredited by the Council of Europe in 2005) have already used with considerable success in Irish primary schools. To miss the opportunity of using the CEFR and ELP now, when we have the chance to reassess and re-develop the Primary Curriculum in relation to the manner in which language is taught and learned, would be, in our opinion, a serious error of omission.

## An Integrated Approach

The meaning of the word 'integrated', as it is used in the document needs clarification. The following references:

- (a) Within this language curriculum **integration** is defined in terms of... **transfer of skills learned across languages. (Draft doc., 7)**
- (b) the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (8)
- (c) the section referring to Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) (14)

suggest that 'integrated' is meant in terms expressed by Cummins and Little where they say: *However, by not creating a context for bilingual language exploration in our classrooms we miss out on one of the most powerful tools that children in such programs have to develop their literacy and awareness of language. In French-English programs and Spanish-English programs, the cognate connections between the languages provide enormous possibilities for linguistic enrichment, but not if the program is set up to ensure that the two languages never meet* (Cummins, 2000: 21).

*...languages should be taught in relation to one another rather than in isolation* (Little, 2008: 10).

The draft document does not convey this understanding. The notion of ‘integrated’ is represented more in the sense of the same language being connected across the curriculum or within the skill set Listening/Speaking/Reading/Writing of the same language (Draft doc., p. 7). While the example given in relation to place names in Geography could be used to draw connections between Irish and English, it is not the most suitable example for children in Junior Infants – Second Class (8). Using aspects of the units of work that represent the strands of the primary curriculum as a means of integrating Irish, English and whatever further languages being taught /mother tongues present in the classroom would be a possibility here (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, 2006: 36).

The area of CLIL (8) needs to be defined and teachers would need guidance on how this approach should be used. The EU is finalising a full document on CLIL at present and this could be used to address needs in this area.

Clarification on the use and implementation of these three senses of integration (integration within a language, across languages and across the curriculum) within the curriculum would allow for the full expression and fulfilment of curriculum aims, in particular aims 2, 3, 4 and 6.

## **English as an Additional Language (EAL)**

In the 1999 curriculum, there was no reference to EAL learning in primary schools despite the fact that there had been for a number of years, a growing population of such learners. While the topic is referred to in the draft document, it is unfortunate that more attention has not been given to it, as much has been learned over the past 20 years from dealing with these children and the manner in which they have shown us how they learn language. There are considerable opportunities for the improvement of and expansion of teaching and learning language to be gained from this cohort of learners. One such example occurs where children experience others communicating and interacting in a language other than their mother tongue, e.g., Arabic; Polish; Chinese; etc. This provides the child with an opportunity for (a) understanding that communication works using different sounds/ words/ phrases to those that I might use (b) the realisation that Gaelige can be used to enter this interesting world of various ways of communicating (c) the beginnings of forming a concept of what language is (d) the development of skills, e.g., reflection, analysis that can be transferred to other areas of learning. This learning opportunity has been missed in this document.

A further omission is the area of developing language awareness. This is an area that can be greatly enhanced and developed in a bi/multilingual milieu.

Neither is there any reference to plurilingualism, an approach to the development of linguistic skills that has been promoted by the Council of Europe since 2001.

By not using the opportunities presented to us in the form of the wide diversity of languages present in our society and classrooms, and by ignoring the experience of the last 20 years (advent of EAL learners in Ireland) with respect to how languages are best learned, we

disenfranchise not only EAL learners but our indigenous (regrettably often monolingual) Irish learners as well.

## **Learner Autonomy**

Learner Autonomy is an area associated with successful language learners. Again, this area is given only cursory reference in the draft document. It would be a pity to lose this opportunity to enhance the development of independent learning that is associated with an integrated approach to language teaching and learning.

There are also areas of ambiguity in the document, i.e.,

*Following a period of immersion in the target language, children transfer the skills they have learned in the target language onto their other languages (8).*

Whereas the Aims section points to the child's prior knowledge of language and how this helps, i.e., *...enable children to build on **prior knowledge and experience of language and language learning to enhance and accelerate their learning of new languages (10).***

The word *many* is not appropriate in the following sentence:

*For many children with EAL, partnerships between the primary school and their homes are critical for planning for and supporting their language learning, to develop the first language of the school while maintaining their home language (8).*

The descriptors and outcomes are present as two parallel monolingual structures that show no areas of overlap as to where they connect in an 'integrated' way. Here is another area where the benchmarks of the CEFR could prove very useful.

## **Context – Social, Linguistic and Language Policy**

There are many suggestions in the course of the Draft Curriculum that through this new document, teachers are being empowered to *value the language experience of all children (14)*, to *nurture their experience of their home language*, to *acknowledge prior knowledge* of other languages (10, 11), yet there is no explicit mention of the very important concepts of language awareness or intercultural awareness which should be fundamental to any new Language Curriculum. The Draft Curriculum also fails to provide any concrete guidance for teachers as to how the other home languages of the children should be integrated into the language learning programme as it is completely, regrettably, focused on English and Irish.

We know that there are over 160 languages spoken by children in our primary system. While the NCCA draft document includes reference to other languages in its aims (10), it is unfortunate and regrettable that following recent developments in language in education policy in the UK, Ireland is now the only EU member state where modern languages have no place in the primary curriculum. This is despite commitments on education policy by EU countries under the Lisbon Treaty (2000) which were further refined in the Barcelona Agreement (2002) and the Action Plan "Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity" (2003) which clearly specified the goal for member states to take action to "improve the mastery of basic skills, particularly to teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age". All other member states have embraced this policy goal, with many

offering more than two foreign languages at primary level. As Ireland is the only EU state where the opportunity to learn additional modern languages is not offered, we believe that future planning for the curriculum should include this option.

It is our opinion that the Draft Curriculum lacks an introduction which would include the present social and linguistic context obtaining in Ireland, as well as an outline of the developments in language learning in this country since the introduction of the Revised Primary Curriculum in 1999. These should include, but not be limited to, developments in EAL provision, the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI) (1999-2012), including the MLPSI's accredited version of the ELP, and the considerable body of research conducted in this area since 1999, much of which was undertaken on the instigation of the NCCA. The inclusion of policy developments in the area of language in education both in Ireland and internationally, particularly in the United Kingdom, would also be most helpful in providing an appreciation of the considerable advances that have been made in this regard in many other countries. This is particularly the case in Scotland and Wales, jurisdictions that are predominantly Anglophone but where additional national languages are also an important concern for their educational system. In our opinion, such additions in terms of societal and policy context and developments would add considerably to the next iteration of the Draft Curriculum and would be of immense interest to all stakeholders in the discussion of the place of languages in our education system.

## References

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