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Multilingual environments: benefits for early language learning

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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní),¹ a primary school in the suburbs of Dublin, has experienced an unprecedented increase in the level of linguistic and cultural diversity in its pupil body. This paper explains how, in responding to this new phenomenon, an integrated approach to language learning was developed in the school in cooperation with teachers, pupils and parents. The school's language policy had two overarching goals:

- To ensure that all pupils become proficient in the language of schooling
- To exploit the linguistic diversity of the school for the benefit of all pupils

Welcoming the plurilingual repertoires of all learners involves the inclusion of home languages in curriculum delivery, and the classroom procedures that facilitate family involvement are described in the present article. The extent to which all languages of the school community are equally valued in light of this programme are examined, including the Irish language, language awareness, and learner autonomy. Issues arising from this approach to linguistic diversity are discussed in addition to implications for practice, policy and further research.

Keywords: *linguistic diversity; plurilingual; language learning*

1. Introduction

Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), Blanchardstown, is a girls' primary school catering to children from age 4+ in Junior Infants to age 11+ in Sixth Class. It is situated in a western suburb of Dublin. In 1994, as a result of the Balkan war, a pupil whose home language was Bosnian was enrolled in third class. She was the first of many children whose home language was

neither Irish nor English to be enrolled in the school. By 2015, almost 80% of the school population had a home language other than English or Irish. Most of these children had little or no English when they started school. Fifty-one home languages in addition to English and Irish were identified, which included Afrikaans, Farsi, Malayalam and Yoruba, among many others.

This paper explains how the arrival of non-native speakers of English in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) contributed to a new focus on language teaching and learning that had a positive impact on native and non-native speakers of English alike. Particular attention is paid to the role of home languages in children's learning and the manner in which they have been incorporated into curriculum delivery. Classroom procedures, including expected and unexpected, outcomes are also highlighted. Issues arising from this are discussed in addition to implications for practice, policy and further research.

1.1. Language issues in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní)

In 1994, and in the remaining years of the twentieth century, there was much discussion among teachers and principals with regard to the issue of increased numbers of newcomer pupils in primary schools and how their needs might best be accommodated (McGorman & Sugrue 2007). The most compelling question related to home languages and to the correct advice to give to parents: should they be encouraged to continue using their home languages? Or, should they be advised to concentrate instead on using English as their means of communication with their children, even if their own English language skills might not be well developed? Much of the thinking encountered at the time by this author, then Principal of Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), favoured the latter. Reflection on this issue, in addition to in-service meetings followed by a publication delivered by Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) helped to bring clarity (IILT 2006).

Given the on-going questions relating to this area, for which there were no readily available answers, in addition to the perception that linguistic diversity in schools and society was not a transient phenomenon, the author made the decision that it was time to inform herself in relation to the challenges and opportunities for language learning inherent in the new school-going population. Enrolment in Trinity College Dublin led to research that highlighted a unique moment in the history of Irish education, i.e. the unprecedented influx of immigrants into Ireland, whether for social, economic or political reasons and the demands that this

placed on the Irish educational system in general and on the primary sector in particular. In order to maximise the benefits of educational provision for newcomer pupils, it was important to understand:

- the relationship between language teaching and learning
- the diversity of learners in terms of learning styles
- the relationship between language and thought and the part played by literacy (Kirwan 2009, p. 147).

The purpose of the research was to explore how these questions were being addressed. This involved the collection (via video recordings, examples of pupils' written work, teacher observations and interviews with parents, pupils and staff), description, analysis and interpretation of linguistic data from a selection of non-native speakers of English giving an overview of what was happening in the development of English language support in a national school in Ireland at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thus began a practice that facilitated on-going co-operation, engagement and exploration of developing practices on the part of teachers, pupils and parents in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní).

1.2. Home languages

Being familiar with the historical trajectory of the Irish language, there was a desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past by excluding the use of pupils' home languages in the learning process. More recently, the outcomes experienced as a result of the prohibition of the use of the Irish language in National Schools in the nineteenth century have been described by Walsh (2011). Equally, from identity and heritage perspectives, there was reluctance in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) to advise parents to stop using their first language (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Therefore, rejection of home languages in favour of English was not an option. Growing awareness of the cognitive benefits to be derived from bilingual or multilingual competence supported the idea that supporting all pupils in the development of plurilingual skills was the most desirable option to take (Bialystok and Cummins, 1991). How that might be implemented was another matter. In attempting to address the needs of all pupils, both English as an Additional Language (EAL) and indigenous Irish learners, there was a further question: why would educators seek to turn potential multilinguals into monolinguals? Such a narrow outcome made no sense when the exciting option of using the linguistic opportunities presented by newcomer EAL pupils for the benefit of all children in the school was becoming increasingly present in classrooms.

One of the fundamental principles of the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) states that ‘the child’s existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning’ (Government of Ireland 1999, p. 8). Working from this understanding, it becomes clear that the home language is a crucial element in pupils’ learning, given that it exists as:

the default medium of their self-concept, their self-awareness, their consciousness, their discursive thinking, and their agency...[and] is thus the cognitive tool that [they] cannot help but apply to formal learning, which includes mastering the language of schooling (Little et al. 2017, p. 202).

1.3. An integrated approach to language learning

Mindful of these issues, two overarching educational goals were identified in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) as providing a way forward. The first was that all pupils should gain full access to education, which meant helping them to become proficient in the language of schooling (i.e. through English, in the case of Scoil Bhríde). The second goal was to exploit the linguistic diversity in the school for the benefit of all pupils, both native English speakers and EAL learners alike (Kirwan 2016). In order to implement these goals, it was important to maximise ways in which the multiplicity of languages could support language learning and learning in general. Teachers encouraged pupils to explore similarities and differences between their home language and the languages of schooling, being aware that “the cognate connections between the languages provide enormous possibilities for linguistic enrichment ...” (Cummins 2000, p. 21).

As a result, where English, Irish and French were taught as discreet entities, home languages became present in all lessons. Pupils were encouraged to contribute their experience and knowledge of their plurilingual repertoires in themed topics and classroom interactions, thus facilitating an integrated approach to language learning that allowed for pupils’ implicit knowledge of language to become explicit. Teachers reported that once activated, pupils themselves began to drive this exploration of language, honing their observational, reflective and analytical skills. These skills, once activated, become available for transfer to other areas of learning as well.

Allied to this, is the aim that a child should be enabled to “live a full life as a child and to realise his/her full potential as a unique individual” (Government of Ireland 1999a, p. 7) in an environment where the principle of collaborative learning is espoused as a feature of the learning process (ibid, p. 9). This supports the idea of making linguistic diversity a resource for all pupils regardless of their linguistic origins. Being valued for who they are and for what they bring with them to the learning process facilitates pupil engagement with their own learning. At the same time, it allows them to appreciate that their peers bring equally valued if different skills, thus preparing them for development as social beings “through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society” (ibid, p. 7).

2. Issues of identity and heritage

Pupils’ awareness of identity and heritage as being linked to language were evident in this study, particularly amongst senior classes. Reflecting on a school ethos where home languages were ignored, discouraged or prohibited, sixth class pupils’ views included the following:

If you know a language that one of your parents knows don’t forget it, don’t try, like, not to speak it, don’t hide away from it because it’s what makes you **you** and it’s special and it’s, you can’t, it’s like having an arm or a leg, you can’t take it away from you. (German speaker 2015).

the child’s language would get closed inside him and he wouldn’t be able to speak it ...be courageous and just say that you want to speak it ... you can’t just focus on one language, you can focus on other languages (Amharic speaker 2015)

For me it would be like pretending that your language never existed. It would be like rejecting your own language. It would be terrible and if it was me I would feel devastated (Foula speaker 2015).

A Kurdish speaker expressed the view that it is sad when schools do not permit pupils to learn other languages, stating “that’s like blocking a huge doorway... it’s taking away an advantage of exploring” (Kurdish speaker 2014).

When asked about their views on the fact that their home languages were encouraged and included in curriculum delivery in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), the following are some responses that pupils made:

[It also helps pupils to get] ...personal into each other's cultures and languages [and] is very useful for friendship, for knowledge, so in many ways we're all expanding... it makes you feel closer because you have a perspective on that person's point of view (Kurdish speaker 2014).

"It's like when two people speak the same language there's a kind of a bond between both of them". (Yoruba speaker 2013).

Another speaker of Yoruba gave the example of a Romanian speaker in her former school who had forgotten her home language and is now a monolingual speaker of English. She went on to say that hearing people speaking their home languages in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) "...it gave me this sort of spark inside". (2014).

2.1. Parental involvement

Parental involvement in the integrated approach to language learning was of particular importance (Kirwan 2015). The PSC recognises that 'parents are the child's primary educators, and the life of the home is the most potent factor in his or her development during the primary school years' (ibid, p. 24). Prior to their children being enrolled in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), the principal met with the parents. Part of the discussion that took place focused on the school's approach to language learning and the potential linguistic and educational benefits for pupils in the plurilingual milieu of the school. Parents whose home language is neither Irish nor English were encouraged to continue to use it with their children. Most parents were relieved to learn that it was acceptable to speak their home language with their children. Some were concerned that it may impede their child's ability to learn English with consequent difficulties in accessing the curriculum. Generally, these parents were reassured when they spoke with parents who shared their language background, who had children currently enrolled in the school or whose children had progressed to second and third level education.

The linguistic strength of the school's teachers lay in their ability to teach English, Irish and French. While they were willing to include home languages in curriculum delivery, they could not possibly be proficient in or teach the multitude of languages present in the school. Parents were, therefore, the recognised experts when it came to the maintenance and development of home languages. The advice to read to their children, to encourage reading for pleasure, and to visit the library with their children was given to all parents, both native and non-native speakers of English alike. The latter group was encouraged to do all this through the medium of their home language. From their first day in school, children were encouraged to use and contribute in their home language as well as using the languages of the school, English and Irish. As children began to develop the interest and ability to read and write, parents were encouraged to provide the necessary literacy expertise in their home languages. This resulted in a level of cooperation between school and home that was beneficial for all learners.

3. Learner autonomy

Encouraging maintenance, development and use of home languages in addition to the exploration of the taught languages of the school, has implications for the development of learner autonomy (Little 1991). This idea is supported by the PSC principles of enabling the child to be an active agent in his/her learning, so as to prepare for further education and lifelong learning (Government of Ireland 1999a, p. 7). When pupils' personal linguistic repertoires are incorporated in curriculum delivery, it acts to enable the child's action-knowledge (the experiential learning that facilitates learners' agency) to be brought to bear on school-knowledge (curriculum content) (Barnes 1976, p. 81). Valuing pupils' home languages and encouraging pupils to use their growing language skills in school presents important opportunities for facilitating the development of plurilingual repertoires and language awareness skills in all learners. Teachers reported that pupils began to become more engaged in classroom discussion when they were able to contribute meaningful information regarding their own language. Some pupils began to do homework, requested by the teacher in either Irish, English or French, or in two and three languages. Others engaged in plurilingual work that they entitled 'Not Homework' to differentiate it from work they were obliged to do.

Where teachers activate pupils' skills to reflect upon, discuss and analyse language, the level of consciousness with regard to language awareness of all participants, including teachers, is

raised. Because teachers cannot be cognizant of all languages in the classroom they, too, become learners in these interactions. This type of participatory learning helps to create an environment where the contributions of all members are valued. It also helps to create what Leni Dam has described as a ‘virtuous circle’ of learning, where awareness of how to learn “facilitates and influences WHAT is being learned and gives an improved insight into HOW to learn” (Dam 1995, p. 2). A sixth class pupil, a native speaker of English, reflected:

Sometimes it’s, like, when we learn a language it’s easier to learn other ones; sometimes it’s not really about which language you’re learning it’s, like, how to learn a language (2015).

A teacher of sixth class pupils stressed the importance of a classroom environment that allowed children to express themselves freely regarding their linguistic observations, stating that “this makes a huge difference... the teacher can stand back and they learn from each other and ... the teacher learns as well”. (2014).

3.1. The Irish language

Initial fears in relation to the effect of more than fifty home languages on the state of the Irish language were unfounded. In fact, the opposite was the case. The status of Irish in the school was enhanced by the integrated language approach. The influence of additional languages being used in the school helped indigenous Irish children to understand that languages are used for communication and that Irish could be used for this purpose too. It was not simply another topic to be learned but could be used for the purpose of meaningful communication with others. In the absence of a home language, as experienced by the newcomer children, indigenous Irish children began to see Irish as their means of having a second functioning language. While many teachers would have used Irish as part of their daily interactions with pupils and colleagues, use of Irish became more widespread and teachers were very happy to exploit this to the extent that communication through the medium of Irish became more commonplace among both pupils and school staff. Nor was this situation confined to teaching staff. The school secretary sourced an internet programme to refresh her Irish language skills as she wanted to respond to pupils who addressed her in Irish. A Special Needs Assistant (SNA) who was a non-native speaker of English also began to learn Irish from her interactions with the children. The Parents’ Association, comprised of indigenous Irish and

newcomer parents, requested that the school initiate Irish language classes as parents wanted to learn the language in order to be in a position to help their children at home.

3.2. Assessment

In March 2014, Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) underwent a Whole School Evaluation by inspectors from the Department of Education and Skills (DES). A recent report by the DES Chief Inspector, evaluated the state of Irish language teaching and learning in primary schools nationwide between the years 2013–2016. Three categories of proficiency level, with the corresponding percentage of schools included in each level, were identified: Very Good – 12%; Good – 60%; and Less than Satisfactory – 28%. Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) was in top 12%, the Very Good category (DES 2018).

Tracking of Drumcondra Reading and Mathematics Standardised Test results from First to Sixth Class in English and Mathematics over a number of years, showed the school's regular achievement scored at or above the national level. These tests had been standardised on a native English-speaking population. They take on a new significance when viewed against the backdrop of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) test results (2016) where Irish ten-year-olds scored first in Europe and third globally.

4. An integrated approach to language teaching in practice

The integrated approach to the teaching and learning of language, taken in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), required a re-evaluation of the pedagogic processes involved. Acknowledging that language was the conduit through which learning occurs, teachers became increasingly aware of the importance of encouraging their pupils to use all their available linguistic resources in order to reach their highest potential. In addition, teachers shared their professional experience regarding the need to be as explicit as possible in their teaching, recognising that not every pupil always understood everything the first time round. The necessity to explain key points more than once, while varying the language used as much as possible, was identified as an important aspect of teaching that benefitted all learners. From this, four principles were identified that reflected the school's developing language policy:

1. An inclusive ethos: The school welcomes and values the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of its pupil population and acknowledges that each pupil has much to

contribute to her own education in terms of her identity, her ‘action knowledge’ (Barnes 1976) and her autonomy (Little 1991).

2. An open language policy: It is recognised that each pupil’s home language is a primary conduit for her learning (Little et al. 2017). Therefore, no restrictions are placed on pupils’ use of home languages whether inside or outside the classroom.
3. A strong emphasis on developing language awareness: Home languages are treated as a resource for all learners (Baker & Prys-Jones 1998; Cummins 2000; Kirwan 2014).
4. A strong emphasis on the development of literacy skills in English, Irish, French and home languages: Writing and speaking support one another in many different ways; parental involvement is an importance resource in their children’s literacy development (Government of Ireland 1999b).

While these principles informed the work of all teachers in the school, teachers’ professional autonomy was respected. Teachers were free to implement the principles in a manner shaped by their own personality, their teaching style and their professional experience.

4.1. Junior and Senior Infant Classes

Teachers in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíni) acknowledged the role that home languages play both in their pupils’ general education and in their learning of English, the language of schooling. Therefore, they encouraged inclusion of all the languages of the classroom from the beginning of the child’s primary education. In cultivating a secure, nurturing environment for pupils in junior infants, teachers encouraged children to:

- express themselves using whatever language comes naturally to them;
- share words and phrases in their own language(s) relevant to topics under discussion, e.g., different colours, types of food, items of clothing, weather; and
- use English, Irish and/or their home language when carrying out tasks that support the learning of basic concepts.

In basic number activities, while teachers taught through the medium of English, they also integrated Irish, in addition to encouraging pupils to perform mathematical functions in their language of choice that may be English, Irish or a home language. Integrating languages in various curricular topics supported greater engagement by pupils who are happy to contribute in their home languages, e.g., when colours are being taught – through both English and Irish

– pupils are invited to identify different colours in their home language. Sometimes the naming of a colour in a particular language made that colour popular with groups of learners. On one occasion, it was the Irish word *corcra* (purple). On another, the Spanish word *rojo* (red) was the common choice of the children. This use of additional languages gave the opportunity for non-native speakers of English to use their home language while at the same time affording speakers of English the experience of beginning to understand that an object may be described in many ways while simultaneously retaining its intrinsic properties.

In senior infants, teachers devised various ways of including home languages in curriculum delivery. Learning the days of the week in sequence features in the curriculum for this level with pupils generally learning through English and Irish. One teacher came up with the idea of gradually expanding this to include all the languages of the classroom. Pupils enjoyed teaching everyone, including the teacher, the names of different days in their home language. Where children were unsure of the word or sequence, parents provided both oral and written forms. Figure 1 shows an example from senior infants.

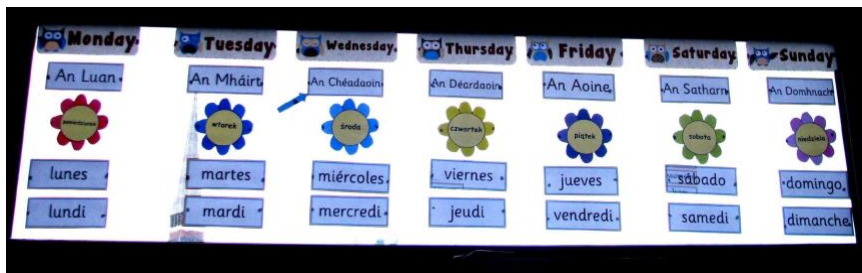


Figure 1: The days of the week showing five of the twelve languages present in the classroom

Pupils played classroom games in pairs: one pupil calls out an action – foot to foot, elbow to elbow, etc. – in English or Irish, her partner called out the action in her home language, and both pupils performed the action. Teachers provided worksheets that could be completed using English, Irish and home languages. See Figure 2 for an example of worksheets from Senior Infants on a whole-school project on healthy eating.



Figure 2: Worksheets written in Irish and English; and English and Malayalam

Poetry and song also provided ways for teachers to facilitate inclusion of home languages, English and Irish. One teacher asked parents to provide examples of nursery rhymes in their respective home languages. She then incorporated these into a medley that was learned by all children in the class. This gave each pupil the opportunity to sing in her own language while at the same time learning songs in the languages of her classmates as well.

4.2. First and Second Classes

In first class, it was a regular feature of classroom interaction that the teacher asked individual children, or children with a shared language background, to translate key words and phrases into their home language. At this stage, children also began to produce texts in two languages. Some children could do this in both English and their home language in school without any help. Others learned to write in English first. They then brought their English text home and their parents helped them to write the text in their home language. The following day, pupils were invited to read their work in both languages for the rest of the class. This gave them the opportunity to practise their skills in both languages while building their confidence at the same time. Figure 3 shows an examples of a text written independently by a pupil in first class.

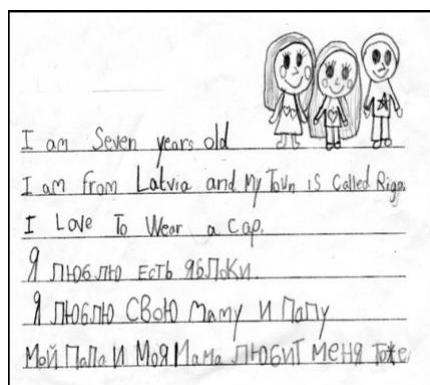


Figure 3: An unaided text in English and Russian written by a pupil in First Class

At this class level, it is also possible to see the emergence of language awareness. An example of this occurred when a six-year-old pupil from a Chinese family was able to recognise and translate a number of words in a children's publication written in Mandarin. When she translated *gate* as *door* she was asked by her teacher why she had used the same word for two different objects. The child explained that, in her language, 'door' is used to describe a means of entry both indoors and outdoors, while in English two different words are needed to take account of the different locations.

In second class, a more elaborate approach was taken to written composition in English. Pupils were invited to choose a topic; write a first draft; revise the draft; present it to the teacher for final correction; and finally, read the draft aloud to the class. The following is an English text created by a native speaker of Spanish:

“The Viking who wanted a pet.”

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a Viking. He had always wanted a pet. And do you know what pet he wanted? He didn't want a dog or a cat or a hamster. He wanted a dinosaur! One day he was outside playing with his friends. 'David, come in' said his sister Sarah. 'It's raining!' 'Coming said David. 'I want a pet' said David. 'Ok' said Sarah. 'Let's go to the pet store.' So they went. 'Would you like a goldfish?' 'No' said David. 'I want a dinosaur' said David. 'A dinosaur?' said Sarah. 'Dinosaurs are extinct' said Sarah. 'You can't have a dinosaur.' 'What else would you like?' said Sarah. 'I don't know' said David. 'What about a cat?' 'NO' said David. 'Let's go home and think about it' said Sarah. So they went. When they got home David thought. Suddenly he screamed 'I want [a] dinosaur.' 'Sshh!' said Sarah. The next day they went to the pet shop again. David looked around. 'Look' said David a dinosaur. 'It's not a dinosaur it's a lizard.' 'What's that' said David. 'It's a parrot' said Sarah. 'Do you know what' said David. Sarah stepped forward hoping that he would not say he wanted a dinosaur. 'I want a parrot' said David. 'Ok' said Sarah. 'Can we have this parrot?' said Sarah. Yes said the shopkeeper as he gave some parrot food and a cage, when they got home Sarah got two small bowls and filled one with water and the other with parrot food. She put them in the cage and then she put the parrot in. I will call you Polly said David. And every day he came to play with Polly and help Sarah with the feeding. The End.

Dual-language texts become more detailed too. Figure 4 shows a dual-language text in English and Lithuanian written by a native speaker of Lithuanian.

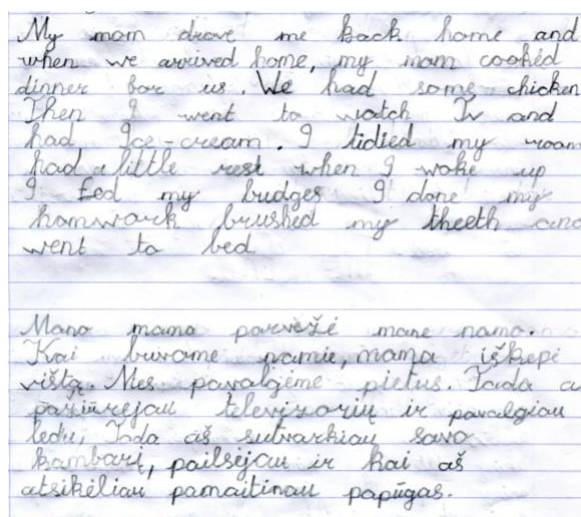


Figure 4: Dual language text in English and Lithuanian

In 2014, an example of autonomous learning in second class occurred after celebrations for European Day of Languages had taken place. The children decided that they wanted to learn the chorus of the song 'It's a small world after all' in all of the languages present in their class. Having discussed the idea with her pupils, their teacher reported that the children became really focussed on achieving their aim. They taught each other in the playground and during spare moments during the day. At the end of a week, each child in the class could sing the chorus in eleven different languages.

4.3. Third and Fourth Classes

Dual-language writing continues to develop in third and fourth classes. Some children began to write in three languages. This included children from English-speaking backgrounds who sought help in learning a third language from an older sibling learning a foreign language at secondary school or from a fellow pupil. Figure 5 shows texts written in three languages by a native-speaker of Hungarian.

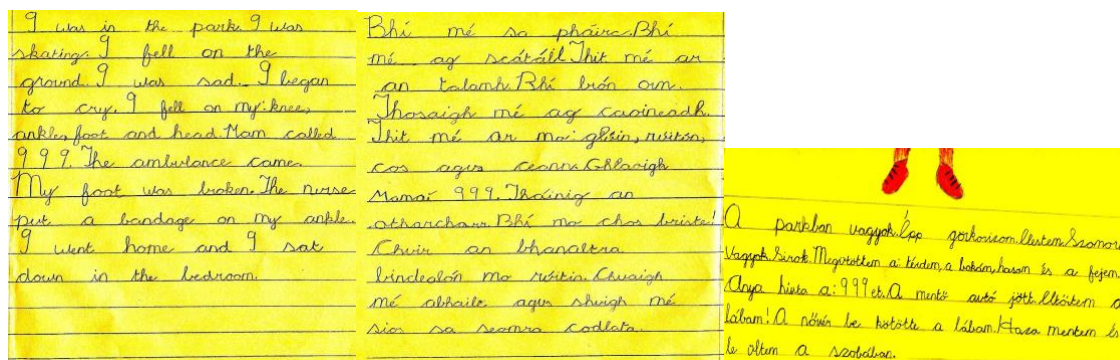


Figure 5: text written in English, Irish and Hungarian

Another pupil, from a Filipino family, demonstrated her autonomous learning skills when she decided to keep a diary recording the exploits of her dog, Oliver. She wrote her diary unaided in Irish. Figure 6 shows the first page.

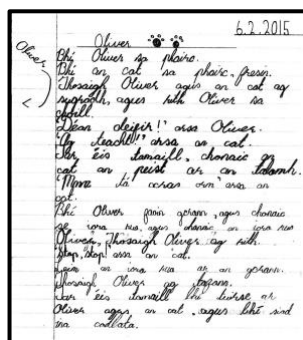


Figure 6: Oliver's diary in Irish. Autonomous writing by a Filipino pupil in Third Class

Another example of pupils using their developing awareness of language arose when several pupils wrote about a hedgehog that had been found in their teacher's garden. One pupil had written her account in English, Irish and Tagalog and read it aloud in each of these languages. Another pupil, of Russian heritage, reported that having listened to the texts she now knew the word for hedgehog in Tagalog. Identifying the closing section of the text as the place where *hedgehog* and *gráinneog* (Irish) had been mentioned, she deduced that *parkupino* was the Tagalog translation as it reminded her of *porcupine*.

In fourth class, a teacher introduced a lesson in Irish, on the sequence involved in making a sandwich. Her pupils, having carried out instructions to record this in Irish, then translated it into English and many of them continued with translations into their home languages. Figure 7 shows an example written in Bisaya.

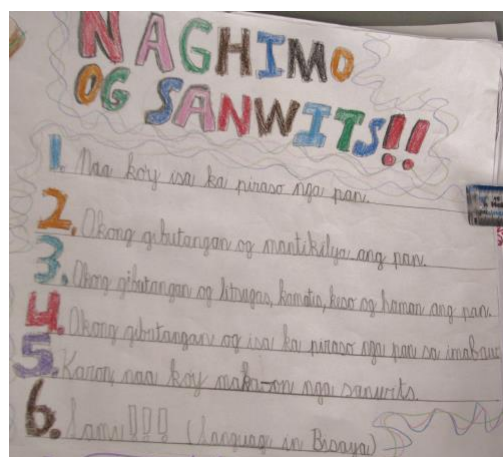


Figure 7: How to make a sandwich written in Bisaya

4.4. Fifth and Sixth Classes

At this level, pupils begin to learn French, which is treated as another language in which to express curriculum content. While all languages are taught as entities, the teacher encouraged her pupils to make comparisons between languages as this helped them to develop observational and analytical skills which are transferrable to all areas of learning including STEM subjects. Figure 8 shows how all the languages in a pupil's plurilingual repertoire can be incorporated into a lesson of the weather in France.

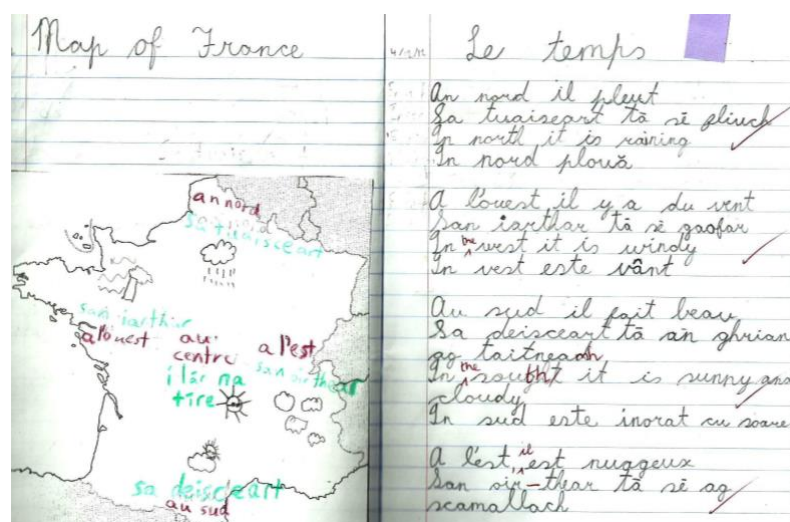


Figure 8: Weather recorded in French, Irish, English and Romanian

On one occasion, a teacher noticed that a group of Romanian pupils was working on a maths problem entirely through the medium of their L1. She did not interfere with this but when they had solved the problem she required them to explain in English how they had arrived at their answer in English.

Another teacher invited her pupils to draw on all the languages at their disposal to translate a Latin Christmas carol into English. The pupils undertook this task with great enthusiasm. On another occasion, pupils began comparing different letter combinations and the sounds made in their respective home languages. A German-speaking pupil commenting on *sz* in Hungarian said:

It's the same in German, where you have ch but you say sh...and do you remember when we were doing the homophones and we had the same words like I said with the three words cherry, church and kitchen, you have Kirsche, Kirche and Küche (2014).

Curiosity in relation to language was also demonstrated by an Irish child who asked her teacher why Irish was “backwards” (in the sense that the adjective follows the noun). The teacher suggested that the pupil should ask her classmates how their home languages behave, after which the pupil concluded that it is actually English that is “backwards”. On another occasion, a Ukrainian speaker and her Polish speaking classmate devised a drama to illustrate how people can understand each other even when they are using different languages to communicate.

Self-assessment was also introduced at this stage. Using the language tree and self-assessment leaves, pupils tested their skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the languages at their disposal and when they were proficient at each skill level they were free to attach their leaf to the tree. Figure 9 shows an image of a language tree and completed self-assessment leaf.



Figure 9: Example of a language tree and self-assessment leaf completed in English, Irish, French and Mandarin

A pupil who was a native speaker of English expressed the view that:

self-assessment is really good, you learn more in it and you can ask questions with your partner and test each other in what questions you can say and read, it's really fun and it's better than doing [workbook] (2013).

As their plurilingual skills develop, pupils use them to write multilingual letters or diaries for fun or to respond to linguistic challenges like writing a story in English using as many French words as possible. Having visited their prospective post-primary school the previous evening, pupils in one Sixth Class responded to their teacher's suggestion to write a report on their experience by using as many languages as possible. In another class, pupils asked their teacher for permission to produce a fashion show as an end of term event. Their teacher agreed, suggesting that they should use all the languages spoken in their class. The children planned the show, acting as both commentators and models. Each model was introduced in two languages, one of which was either Irish or English, the other being a home language. After the show, the teacher asked them to invent a model and describe her in as many languages as they could. Figure 10 shows one example.

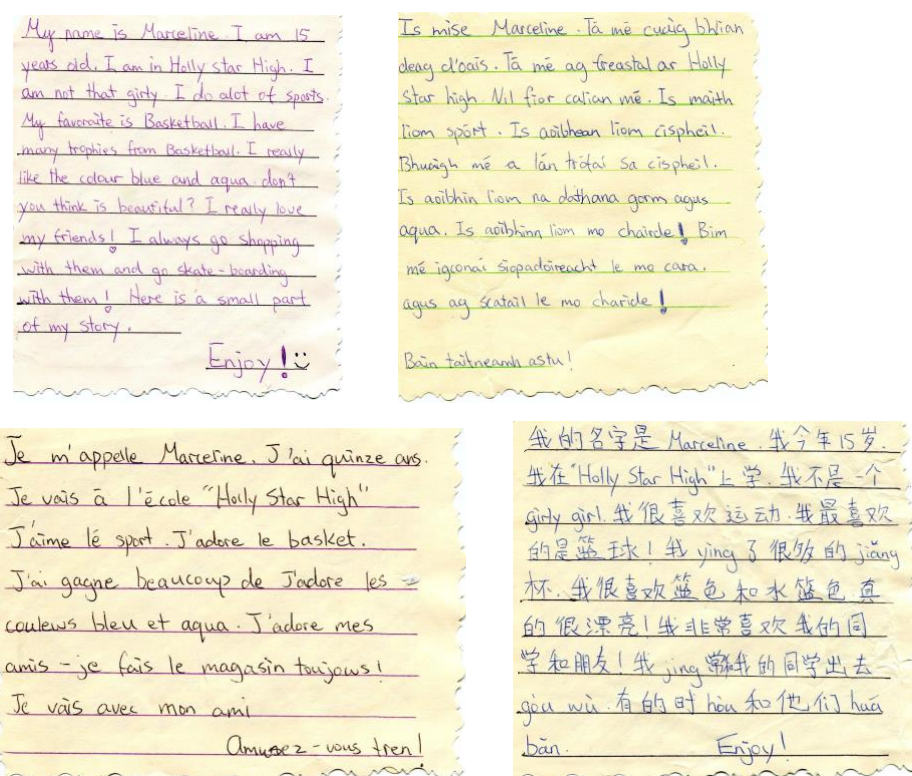


Figure 10: A description of 'Marceline' written in English, Irish, French and Mandarin

5. Conclusion

The approach to language education developed in Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) is based on four assumptions. The first is that plurilingual pupils will learn most effectively if they are

encouraged to use all the languages at their disposal autonomously – whenever and however they want to. The second acknowledges that even very young children can be trusted to know how to use their home language autonomously as a tool of learning. The third assumption is that development of oral proficiency, literacy and language awareness is a complex process in which reading and writing support listening and speaking and *vice versa*. The last recognises that language awareness is a tool to support learning but also one of learning's most valuable outcomes and it develops spontaneously when pupils make autonomous use of the languages at their disposal.

Building on these assumptions, the key features of the approach acknowledge that the reflective and analytical dimensions of learning are firmly rooted in what pupils themselves contribute, i.e., their knowledge and experience is the starting point for new learning. Because classroom interaction takes account of their existing knowledge, skills and interests, pupils tend to be fully engaged and highly motivated. Because pupils are agents of their own learning, their ability to direct and evaluate their learning becomes increasingly apparent as they progress through the school. Finally, the development of literacy in English as the principal language of schooling feeds into but also depends on the development of pupils' literacy in their home language, Irish and (in fifth and sixth Class) French.

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