

Response to the
consultation by the
National Council
for Curriculum
and Assessment
on the Draft
Primary Language
Curriculum,
July 2014

The Royal Irish Academy/Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann, Ireland's national academy for the sciences, humanities and social sciences, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on the Draft Primary Language Curriculum for all children from Junior Infants to Second Class in English-medium and Irish-medium schools. This paper was informed by submissions from Members of the Academy⁷ and compiled by the Academy's Policy and International Relations Unit. The views expressed in this submission are not necessarily shared by each individual member of the Academy.

Key points

- There is scope for greater consideration of the integration of language acquisition and language learning goals and aims in the context of supporting non-English-speaking migrant pupils.
- Teachers should be supported to have the requisite skills and competence in Irish to implement successfully the Integrated Primary Language Curriculum (IPLC) requirement for that language.
- Broadening the curriculum to include a foreign language at some stage of the primary school curriculum should be considered.
- The emphasis within the proposed curriculum on play as a methodology to support children's language learning and development is welcome.
- The IPLC should contain a clear framework on how the desired learning outcomes are to be achieved.

The rationale of the new Integrated Primary Language Curriculum

The multilingual nature of the primary school in Ireland is a crucial feature of the learning experience for children – and the teaching experience of teachers – and it is imperative to take that into account in the formulation of a primary curriculum for Irish and English.

The proposed IPLC is predicated on the teaching of Irish and English *only* as the two compulsory languages. While the majority of students will most likely come from homes in which English is the only language, some may come from homes in which one or both parents are fluent in Irish. The estimation that some 5%¹ of students come from homes in which neither English nor Irish is the dominant language is of note in the discussion around the rationale for language acquisition.² Further consideration could usefully be given within the draft IPLC to the integration of language acquisition and language learning goals and the roles of mainstream class teachers and language support teachers in supporting non-English-speaking migrant pupils.

- The integration of language acquisition with language learning goals for non-English-speaking migrant pupils could be usefully expanded upon within the draft curriculum.

¹ The 5% figure is arrived at by dividing the 26,596 children for whom English is not their first language (CSO) by the figure of 509,000 students at primary level in 2012 as per Department of Education and Skills statistics, accessed at <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/Key-Statistics-2012-2013-Pamphlet-.pdf>

² The 2013 Annual Monitoring Report on Integration (Economic and Social Research Institute, 2014) noted: "In PISA 2012, about half of the migrant children speak English at home and their scores are broadly similarly to those of their Irish peers in reading and mathematics. On the other hand, it is clear that non-English-speaking children tend to perform worse, although the gap seems to have lowered somewhat", accessed at <http://esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/BKMNEXT266.pdf>

In respect of Irish-language learning in any of the three types of schools listed (English-medium, Gaelscoileanna and schools in the Gaeltacht), the IPLC's success is significantly dependent on teachers having the necessary degree of competence in the Irish language. This is necessary to achieve a stated objective of the draft curriculum, namely that children be given the opportunity to use the second language outside the formal language lesson. This is a vital component of the bilingual strategy. To do this successfully will require the integration of Irish throughout the day in informal conversation and within other curricular areas across the whole school. Each school should be supported to ensure that its teachers have the requisite skills in Irish to implement successfully the IPLC requirement of that school. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a valuable resource in encouraging this, and regular in-service training could be implemented to help teachers maintain and improve their competency in areas such as oral language, grammar and idiomatic use of the language.

- It would be desirable for teachers to be given in-term CPD or to have the opportunity to spend periods in the Gaeltacht to ensure they have the necessary fluency and confidence in the Irish language to deliver the syllabus and promote the integration of Irish into the school day.

Assessing the aims of the new Integrated Primary Language Curriculum

Ireland is the only country in Europe, other than Scotland, where a foreign language is not compulsory at any stage of the mainstream educational curriculum.³ The cognitive, creative and other benefits of language learning are well documented in research.⁴

- The aims of the IPLC could be broadened to take account of the increasing linguistic capacity of children beyond English and Irish, to include at least a third language, at some stage of the primary school curriculum.

The aims of the IPLC should also reflect the situation in Gaelscoileanna, where not infrequently a degree of fluency is achieved in a form of Irish that is very much based on phonology and syntax. While some influence from the first language (L1) curriculum is to be expected, in some cases this may be excessive. In Scotland and Wales, children whose native language is Gàidhlig or Welsh are enabled to attain the same learning outcomes in their L1 as their native-English-speaking peers. The skills they acquire in the first school language can be transferred to English at a later stage.⁵ Building flexibility into the proposed Progression Continua in Ireland is one way in which to address the specific needs of native Irish speakers. It would also facilitate a total early immersion approach in Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools, allowing for differing periods of time for total immersion and on the sequencing of reading instruction in Irish and English.

- The aims of the IPLC should be to ensure that native speakers of Irish in Gaeltacht schools achieve the same learning outcomes in Irish as native-English-speaking children do in English.

³ Royal Irish Academy Modern Languages Committee, 2011, *National Languages Strategy*, p.2, accessed at <http://www.ria.ie/RIA/files/5c/5cb54189-c744-4c7a-9d84-323571e2d52c.pdf>

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵ NCCA, Research Report Number 14, *Oral language in early childhood and primary education*, p.64, accessed at http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary_School_Curriculum/Language_Curriculum_Research_Reports/_c1.pdf

The appropriate concepts, dispositions and skills for children’s language development

The model adopted in the IPLC is predominantly a communicative model of language, in which a writer/speaker has a message s/he wishes to communicate; the message is encoded in language, and the reader/auditor acts as a receptor for the message. As a model of the functional uses of language, this is perfectly adequate. It is important to acknowledge that the Learning Outcomes laid out in the draft curriculum recognise the range of contexts in which children learn and develop language such as during story time and during play. Nevertheless, it is arguable that this concept should be more fully developed in the new IPLC, to the point where language as play should be of more or less equal importance to the concept of language as communication.

The concept of language as play recognises language as the means by which new ideas are created, or language uses that explore the possibilities of language. The late Seamus Heaney put this well when he wrote of “the vitality and insouciance of lyric poetry”, and “its relish of its own inventiveness, its pleasuring strain”. There are aspects of language such as puns, rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia (when a word sounds like the thing it describes – i.e. bacon ‘sizzles’), as well as uses of metaphor and simile, whose functions are not primarily communicative. This is language in which no message precedes the utterance, and where the communication of meaning is not a priority. As the poet Archibald MacLeish famously (and succinctly) put it: “A poem should not mean, but be.”

This is the conceptual basis for the formal study of poetry, which is perhaps more appropriate to second level, and may sound too sophisticated for primary level. However, it can equally be understood as play, a concept that is at the heart of much best practice in early childhood pedagogy. It is evident within the IPLC that there no developed notion of language as play, as opposed to the development of language as communication.

Of interest to this discussion is a recent paper by the British Council – the UK’s international organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations – which states:

“Picking up and repeating the particular language of rhymes is another form of play for young children. They learn rhymes unconsciously and effortlessly; it is not the laborious task it can be for some adults. By playing with the short texts of rhymes, children explore the mechanics of the English language. They find out how language works and become familiar with the relationship between the 44 sounds of English and the 26 alphabet letters – information which helps them when they begin reading to decode the sounds that make up words. The value of this type of language-play with rhymes in early learning is both underestimated and undervalued.”⁶

- The emphasis within the proposed curriculum on “play” as a methodology to support children’s language learning and development is welcomed and could be further developed.

⁶ The British Council, *Learning English through sharing rhymes*, prepared by O. Dunn, accessed at www.learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/

Evaluation of the proposed learning outcomes of the new Integrated Primary Language Curriculum

The section on the various learning outcome strands or *snáithe* is the most valuable and central part of the paper. The Irish *snáithe*, while not very ambitious, do have the advantage of being unambiguous. In general they are appropriate, although lacking in specificity. The earlier section of the paper (p.7) refers to the “integration between languages”, and “integrating Irish throughout the day” in English-medium schools, but there is little in the learning outcomes on how this might be done, or the level or amount of “integration”. The important part of any educational proposal is not what is set down and set forth, but how this is to be carried out. It may not be the purpose of this exercise, but the practicality of what is to be achieved must be in the heads of the drafters, as the art of teaching and the wonder of knowledge should be linked, even tenuously, to the carving of learning outcomes.

- The Integrated Primary Language Curriculum should contain a clear framework on how the learning outcomes are to be achieved.

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