Supporting the development of language awareness

PRIMARY LANGUAGE CURRICULUM
ENGLISH

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 /Scríbhneoireacht**

Using the languages of the classroom to promote language awareness

Language is the chief means by which we think. Regardless of the language used, all language activities are exercises in thinking. From a very early stage in their development, most children begin to use language to express themselves. Their implicit understanding of what they say helps them to express their needs with a view to having those needs met. Developing an awareness of language, what it is and how it works, enables learners' *implicit* knowledge and understanding of language to be raised to an *explicit* level e.g., a child may recognise a sound that occurs in his/her home language and in Irish and know that it does not occur in English. It is one of the most important outcomes of an integrated approach to language learning.

Being language aware contributes to the learning of language(s) and curriculum content and the development of literacy. It helps to develop children's confidence and helps them to become independent learners. Classrooms where children are exposed to, and use, more than one language in a meaningful way, provide an excellent environment for language awareness to develop.

All languages, be they English, Irish and/or home languages, provide a resource for developing language awareness among all learners including those who only have experience of one language at home (Kirwan 2014; Little and Kirwan, 2019)

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Valuing all the languages present in the classroom is the first step towards using them to develop the language awareness of all learners. By encouraging children to draw on their existing linguistic knowledge, their own individual linguistic repertoire, teachers activate their interest in exploring the similarities and differences that exist among the languages in the environment of both the school and the home. Teachers support language awareness by encouraging children to use their home language at school. Everyone, including the teacher, benefits from this. Teachers do not need to know,

Until their capacity for finding similarities and differences between languages is activated, children may not be conscious of their existing knowledge (Cummins 2000).

and cannot know, all the languages present in their classrooms. What is important is that children are encouraged to make linguistic comparisons between their home language (which may/may not be the language of schooling) and the additional languages present in the classroom. When this kind of environment is cultivated, children make their own inferences from the sounds of words, how they are written, and how they are used to convey meaning. In this way, language awareness becomes a tool to support learning but also one of learning's most valuable outcomes.

It is important that all children, regardless of the presence, or not, of additional languages in the school, get the opportunity to develop their awareness of language. This can be done by examining foreign language

labels of everyday objects, clothing and foodstuffs; watching TV programmes that use languages other than Irish or English, e.g., **Dora the Explorer**; collecting information, labels, flyers while on holidays in non-English speaking countries.

In an integrated approach to language learning, the development of literacy in English or Irish as the principal language of schooling feeds into but also depends on the development of children's literacy in English, Irish and home language.

Because many of the languages will have vocabulary that is similar to that used in Irish, it will help to enhance the perception of Irish as a living language that can readily be used for communication purposes.

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Benefits of developing children's language awareness: Key points for consideration

When children are encouraged to use all the languages at their disposal, the following benefits can occur:

- Development of the target language(s), i.e., English, Irish, home language is/are facilitated
- Home languages are supported
- Learner autonomy is developed
- Learning how to learn is supported
- The language competences of EAL learners become an asset for the whole class and for the teacher
- Monolingual learners are exposed to the reality of communication in languages other than the majority language
- Teachers' own learning is enhanced.

Schools' openness to integrating all the languages present in the school enhances children's:

- self-confidence
- self-motivation leading to autonomous learning
- engagement in learning
- language awareness skills
- observational, analytical skills
- reflective skills
- facility to allow implicit knowledge become explicit
- curiosity about languages
- understanding of and empathy for others.

> When all languages present in the classroom are used, monolingual learners are exposed to the reality of communication in languages other than the majority language.

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Strategies to promote and support language awareness

Children know how to use their language skills autonomously. Encourage pupils as individual learners and collaboratively with peers, to use all the languages in their repertoire to identify similarities and differences between the languages used in the classroom.

A whole school approach supports the development of multilingual environments on a daily basis through teaching and learning. In addition, schools may consider the following activities appropriate for enhancing the recognition of languages across the school community:

- Displaying a school 'welcome sign' in all the languages of the children.
- Using all school events as a vehicle for validating and raising awareness of languages, e.g., signs/notices at art exhibitions; open days; concerts; etc.
- Translating school mottos, mission statements, anthems and/or prayers into the languages of the classroom and displaying for children to examine.
- Learning the same song/chorus in different languages, e.g., *Twinkle, Twinkle little star/ It's a small world after all.* Children or their parents may provide the translation.
- Organising events such as European Day of Languages to celebrate all the languages of the children. See https://edl.ecml.at/ and https://www.leargas.ie for more details.
- Displaying school signs in different languages, e.g., push/pull on door handles; thank you/please; single file; etc. This may be done on a rotational basis depending on the number of languages in the school.
- Encouraging children to create dual, (trilingual, plurilingual) texts of their choice helps to hone skills of analysis and evaluation necessary for language awareness.
- Displaying a welcome flower where the petals are filled in with greetings in different languages is an effective way to draw attention to languages
- Learning the days of the week in all the languages of the classroom. This can be done orally in Infant classes (with written posters where appropriate).
- Using and comparing greetings in the languages of the classroom.
- Answering roll call can be undertaken in the languages of the classroom.
- Exploring the clues available in words to access their meaning, e.g., how many legs has an **octo**pus? How many sides has a **dec**agon? What age is a **sept**uagenarian/ **nona**genarian?

All suggestions can be developed and made increasingly complex as children progress through school.

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Effective conditions for developing language awareness

- In English-medium schools, use of Irish by the teacher when teaching Irish and in informal, daily interactions is vitally important for giving children access to the language, in this case as L2.
- Using the context of additional languages present in the classroom heightens children's awareness that Irish is a language that can be used for communication purposes just like any other language.
- It is important that children are guided to reflect on Irish as a means of communication and also as a rule-governed system, e.g., unlike English, the noun is followed by the adjective in Irish, *mála dearg*; the verb is at the beginning of the sentence in Irish.

- For native speakers of English, comparisons such as this can place the Irish language in the position of being at odds with the 'norm', English. This is where the addition of other languages can create balance and insight, e.g., what happens with the noun and adjective in other languages in the classroom - sac rouge (French); *borsa rossa* (Italian); *rote Tasche* (German). Like Irish, Arabic also places the verb at the beginning of the sentence. Children's discussion of such comparisons can help expand their linguistic concepts.
- Inviting children to make explicit from their understanding of language the connections and similarities that exist between two or more languages provides opportunities for all learners to develop the skills needed for

language awareness. It can also stimulate interest and motivation in pupils to learn other languages.
- Any activity undertaken in primary school presents opportunities for developing awareness of language, e.g., comparison of greetings, days of the week, food, clothes, animals, etc.
- It is not necessary for the teacher to know the additional languages of the classroom Inviting children who are native-speakers of additional languages to use their home language in the classroom, facilitates the use of those languages as a resource for all pupils. This allows for greater input, involvement and engagement by children in their own learning. This also encourages the development of learner autonomy.

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