Developing Functional Language and Literacy Skills for the Child Learning English as an Additional Language

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

Children develop concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:

- **Oral language:** sentence structure and grammar, acquisition and use of vocabulary, comprehension, requests and questions, retelling and elaborating
- **Reading:** comprehension
- **Writing:** vocabulary

Context

Most schools have some pupils who are learning English as an additional language (EAL) and, in some schools, a majority of pupils may be learning English as an additional language. Many children learning English as an additional language, depending on their age, will have age-appropriate competency in their first language(s). Some may be monolingual when they first arrive in an Irish classroom, some may be bilingual or multilingual in languages other than English. Depending on age, many may be reading and writing in their home languages.

It is important that children whose first language is neither English nor Irish are integrated into all activities in the classroom. During the early stages of language learning or language acquisition in the context of English immersion, some children may appear to be at sea, or silent. It is at this stage of language learning that children should be allowed to code-switch (use words or parts of sentences in the language(s) of the home). Good development in any second language (English/Irish) in the classroom normally involves code-switching as learners

and teachers try to negotiate meaning in the teaching/learning situation. Children sharing their language is an important part of integrating them into all lesson activities. This will not only validate their home language, but it will also motivate them to participate and engage in classroom activities and conversations.

When working with children learning English as an additional language, it is necessary to first consider the child in an age-appropriate context rather than in a dependency perspective only. The child will, after all, have acquired the foundation elements of language in their home language(s), engagement, listening and attention in oral language and – possibly to some extent – in reading and writing. Chronological age

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may be helpful but is not the only criterion to be considered, depending on cultural and socio-economic circumstances. A child aged seven joining the Irish school system may or may not have been exposed to formal reading and writing in their first language, depending on background, whereas a child who joins at age ten would almost certainly have had this experience.

It is important to point out that language development will not happen automatically or in any ad hoc approach. A carefully planned policy and approach for language development is required, including code-switching from home language(s), acquisition and use of oral vocabulary in English/Irish, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and word recognition, spelling and vocabulary in writing.

An increasing number of children learning English as an additional language who arrive in Junior Infant classes will have experienced an English language pre-school via the free pre-school provision. It is imperative, for example, for the teacher to ascertain the above by communication with the parents/guardians and other stakeholders.

Common factors

Children learning English as an additional language may exhibit a **'silent period'**, which sometimes may last up to six months or more, during which they are listening to and absorbing language in context before feeling comfortable to use it. During this period, children may communicate via non-verbal means such as gestures. They may copy other children's language from context before using single word utterances and rote phrases. Over time, phrases grow in length and complexity.

primary developments
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Suggestions for practice

- Speak clearly.

- Slow slightly the pace of speech (not artificially slow).

- Highlight/emphasise key language.

- Repeat instructions.

- Provide a running narration/ commentary on task in hand, e.g., *Now I am going to draw a circle. I am drawing the circle. Do you see the circle?*

- Invite children to volunteer equivalent of vocabulary items in their home language(s).

- Display words from children's home languages in the classroom.

- Use the whiteboard effectively.

- Expand one word utterances in an incremental fashion.

- Correct by modelling correct version.

- Support oral language by gesture, pointing, mime, photos, visuals, on-line materials, apps.

- Use reading as a support for developing oral competence.

- Allow for silent period; do not necessarily expect language production.

- Acknowledge home language(s).

- Boost confidence by errorless learning opportunities, *mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí.*

- All subjects offer potential for language learning, e.g., PE instructions for activities.

> Plan the language development of children learning English as an additional language.

> Use language of home as a resource and bridge to English language development.

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> As a native speaker of English, consider yourself as a rich resource for children learning English as an additional language and constantly provide input.

Teacher's role

Comprehensible input is critical for language learning, and adaptations made by teachers to facilitate understanding are essential. Teachers are required, therefore, to constantly provide rich oral and written language input, even in the sustained absence of English/Irish language usage (production) by the child.

Teachers may support English language learning by scaffolding the learner in a naturalistic fashion, such as providing a running commentary on activities in hand. This provides immediate, in-situ input and helps the learner make sense of the language happening around them. Teachers may find it useful to consider the Functions of Language/ Feidhmeanna Teanga in *Curaclam na Bunscoile: Gaeilge* (p.20ff.) to help reinforce pupils' functional competence.

For children learning English as an additional language, all areas of the primary curriculum are rich sources of language and provide potential for language usage and development in terms of vocabulary acquisition, enrichment and pragmatics.

Resources and strategies used to support children with language and communication delays and difficulties may also be considered where appropriate, i.e., visual route to language, Lámh signs, PECS, etc. In order to provide effectively for pupils learning English as an additional language, schools may also need to liaise with the home, with the EAL teacher (where available) and possibly with learning support.

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Ideas to support a positive response to linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom

Positive response to linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom. Ideas:

8 ways to foster reading growth in multilingual learners

http://www.k12reader.com/8-ways-to-foster-reading-growth-in-multilingual-learners/

Code-switching lessons

http://www.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/e02610/csl_introduction.pdf

Language Flower

http://mylanguages.org/write_name.php

Languages and Immigration : raising awareness of language and linguistic diversity in schools. ELODIL (Canada)

http://www.elodil.com/files/article%20PRIMAIREeng.pdf

Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative

http://www.mlpsi.ie/

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O' Rourke, B. (2011) Negotiating multilingualism in an Irish primary school context in Hélot, C. & Ó Laoire M. (eds) Language policy for the multilingual classroom: Pedagogy of the possible. (pp. 107-127) Bristol: Multilingual Matters.