HTTPS://WWW.DOI.ORG/10.32320/978-961-270-345-5.279-307

Rethinking language teaching: the theory and practice of plurilingual education
Ponovni razmislek o poučevanju jezikov: teorija in praksa raznojezičnega izobraževanja

David Little, Trinity College
Déirdre Kirwan, Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), Blanchardstown

Abstract

This article describes the plurilingual and intercultural approach to primary education developed by Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), Blanchardstown, Ireland. The article begins by outlining the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual and intercultural education and its pedagogical implications. It then describes Scoil Bhríde in context, explains its approach to language education, and summarizes the learning outcomes it achieves: unusual levels of language awareness and proficiency in Irish; literacy in home languages; the motivation and capacity to undertake language-related learning beyond what teachers require; and high levels of pupil self-confidence and self-esteem. The article then explores Scoil Bhríde's approach from the perspectives of learner-centredness, dialogic pedagogy, translanguaging, language learning as socialization, the "language experience" approach to teaching reading and writing, and pluriculturalism and interculturality. The conclusion briefly considers some of the implications of Scoil Bhríde's approach.

Keywords: plurilingual and intercultural education; home language; dialogic pedagogy; translanguaging; autonomous learning

Povzetek

Članek opisuje raznojezični in medkulturni pristop k osnovnošolskemu izobraževanju, ki so ga razvili na šoli Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) v Blanchardstownu na Irskem. Članek najprej oriše koncept Sveta Evrope o raznojezičnem in medkulturnem izobraževanju in njegovih peda-

goških implikacijah. Nato predstavi kontekst šole Scoil Bhríde, pojasni njen pristop k jezikovnemu izobraževanju in povzame učne rezultate, ki jih dosega: nenavadne ravni jezikovnega zavedanja in znanja irščine; pismenost v domačem jeziku; motivacijo in sposobnost za učenje, povezano z jezikom, ki presega zahteve učiteljev; ter visoko raven samozavesti in samospoštovanja učencev. Članek nato raziskuje pristop Scoil Bhríde z vidika osredinjenosti na učenca, dialoške pedagogike, medjezikovnega prepletanja, učenja jezikov kot socializacije, pristopa "jezikovne izkušnje" k poučevanju branja in pisanja ter raznokulturnosti in medkulturnosti. V zaključku so na kratko obravnavane nekatere posledice pristopa šole Scoil Bhríde.
Ključne besede: raznojezično in medkulturno izobraževanje; domači jezik; dialoška pedagogika; medjezikovno prepletanje; samostojno učenje

1. Introduction: The Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual and intercultural education

For the past two decades, the Council of Europe has promoted the concept of "plurilingual and intercultural education". The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) defines plurilingualism as "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4). The CEFR reminds us that traditionally language education has sought to "achieve 'mastery' of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the 'ideal native speaker' as the ultimate model" (*ibid*., p. 5); now, "the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory in which all linguistic abilities have a place" (*ibid*.). This change of perspective carries two significant implications. First, languages should no longer be kept in separate curricular and pedagogical compartments but should be taught and learnt in relation to one another; and second, the languages learners already know necessarily provide the basis for learning new languages. This latter consideration has profound consequences for the educational inclusion of pupils and students whose home language is not a variety of the language of schooling.

According to the CEFR, plurilingual competence is one component of pluricultural competence: "Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experi-

ence of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168). As this quotation perhaps suggests ("pluricultural competence", "intercultural interaction"), there is a tendency in the CEFR to treat "pluricultural" and "intercultural" as interchangeable. But in a paper written for the Council of Europe's project *Languages in Education/Languages for Education*, Michael Byram (2009) distinguishes clearly between them. He defines pluriculturalism as a matter of "identifying with at least some of the values, beliefs and/or practices of two or more cultures, as well as acquiring the competences which are necessary for actively participating in those cultures" (p. 6), and interculturality as "the capacity to experience and analyse cultural otherness, and to use this experience to reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one's own culture and environment" (*ibid*). Both capacities clearly come into play when pupil and student cohorts are linguistically and culturally diverse.

According to another key document produced by the Council of Europe's project *Languages in Education/Languages for Education*, "plurilingual and intercultural education is not to be thought of as a new methodology for the teaching of languages" but rather as "a change of perspective" (Cavalli et al., 2009, p. 7). This is surely mistaken: the concept of plurilingualism interwoven with pluriculturalism and interculturality implies a revolution in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Over the past two decades the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz have produced a substantial body of documents and resources designed to support this revolution. To date, however, the approach has not been widely adopted, there are few well-documented examples of successful practice, and the more general implications for language teaching and learning remain largely unexplored.

This article seeks to address these deficiencies by describing and interpreting a plurilingual and intercultural approach to primary education which to the best of our knowledge is *sui generis*. The approach was developed by an Irish primary school, Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) (St Brigid's School for Girls), Blanchardstown, whose pupil cohort is characterized by a high degree of linguistic and cultural diversity. Déirdre Kirwan was principal of the school from 1987 to 2015. Our account of the school's policy and practice is informed by a corpus of qualitative data she collected over a number of years: teachers' lesson plans and reports, examples of pupils' work, video recordings of classroom interactions, interviews with pupils and teachers, and so on. It is important to emphasize at the outset that Scoil Bhríde

(Cailíní) has neither special status nor access to resources not available to other schools. Its distinctive response to the educational challenge posed by extreme linguistic and cultural diversity was informed by Kirwan's PhD research (2004–2009), which was supervised by David Little; but in essence the response came from within the school, was inspired by the learner-centred ethos of the Primary School Curriculum, and entailed the adjustment of long-established pedagogical practice to meet the needs of a rapidly changing pupil population.

The article is divided into two main sections. First, we sketch the broader context in which Scoil Bhríde exists, describe its pupil cohort, summarize the main features of its approach, and provide some evidence of its success. Then we explore the school's policy and practice from the perspectives of learner-centredness, dialogic pedagogy, translanguaging, a language socialization view of language learning, the "language experience" approach to teaching reading and writing, pluriculturalism and interculturality. In doing so, we hope to shed some light on the Council of Europe's enticing but often underspecified concept of plurilingual and intercultural education in relation to the educational inclusion of pupils from immigrant families. We conclude by briefly considering the implications of Scoil Bhríde's success for language education more generally.

2. Plurilingual and intercultural education in practice: Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), Blanchardstown

2.1 The national context

Although Irish is the country's first official language, it is the first, home or preferred language of only a small minority of the population. Irish-speaking communities survive, mostly in rural areas on or close to the south-western, western and north-western seaboards, but most Irish nationals are English-speaking and there are no monolingual Irish speakers. English and Irish are separated socially: street signs and other public notices are bilingual, but English-speaking residents easily forget that they are living in a country whose first official language is not English. In the majority of schools English is the language of instruction and school management. Irish is, however, an obligatory curriculum subject from the beginning to the end of schooling.

The past three decades have seen a steady growth of immigration into Ireland. Small numbers of refugees from the Balkan wars were admitted in

the early 1990s; later in the decade there was a rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers and economic migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe; migrant workers were recruited from non-EU countries to serve the expanding economy; and large numbers of immigrants came from Eastern European and Baltic states after the enlargement of the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013. Between 1996 and 2016 the population grew by 31 per cent, from 3.6 to 4.8 million, and today Ireland is a linguistically and culturally diverse society.

The immigrant population is not spread evenly across the country: most immigrants live in urban areas where they can find jobs and housing is affordable. Some schools have many immigrant pupils/students,[1] some have a few, and some – especially in rural areas – have none at all. Immigrants have brought with them some 200 languages, and the pre-school experience of their children is mostly lived through one of these languages rather than through English or Irish. At the end of the 1990s, the government responded to the educational challenge this posed by funding two years of English language support for each EAL pupil/student (that is, pupils/students for whom English is an Additional Language). EAL pupils/students are assigned to a mainstream class, usually on the basis of their age, and provided with English language support in small groups withdrawn from their mainstream class for the purpose. From 2000 to 2008, Integrate Ireland Language and Training (a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin of which David Little was non-stipendiary director) developed support materials and resources and mediated them to teachers in regular in-service seminars (Little and Lazenby Simpson, 2009). In 2008 funding was withdrawn from IILT, and since then schools have mostly been left to their own devices.

Primary schooling in Ireland lasts for eight years, from 4½ to 12½. There are two preliminary years, Junior and Senior Infants, equivalent to pre-school in other countries, and six grades, known as Classes. The Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) is divided into seven areas: language (English and Irish); mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education (history, geography, science); arts education (visual arts, music, drama); physical education; social, personal and health education; religious or ethical education. This last area is the responsibility of the different school patron bodies, predominantly the Roman Catholic Church and the (Anglican) Church of Ireland.

1 In Ireland it is usual to refer to pupils at primary and students at post-primary level.

2.2 Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní)'s increasingly diverse pupil cohort

Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) belongs to the Roman Catholic parish of Blanchardstown. Until the mid-1990s, the school's catchment area had an ageing population, so the school was able to admit a significant number of children from Blanchardstown's rapidly expanding hinterland where large numbers of immigrants settled. As the number of girls attending the school increased, so too did the diversity of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By 2003, 20 per cent of the school's pupils came from immigrant families, and this figure rose steadily over the next ten years until, in the school year 2014–2015, 80 per cent of the pupils came from immigrant families. By this stage there were more than 50 home languages in the school. Most pupils started at Scoil Bhríde aged 4½, but there were always a small number of pupils who joined the school at a later stage, having arrived with their parents from another country.

Scoil Bhríde's EAL pupils represent multiple diversities. Some parents come from communities in Africa and India where multilingualism is widespread and fluid; others come from countries that identify one language with the nation state. Some languages – e.g. Polish, Latvian and Lithuanian – are spoken by a minority of pupils at all levels of the school; others are represented by just one family or a single pupil. Most pupils were born in Ireland and had much the same pre-school experience as their Irish peers, though it was filtered through a language other than English or Irish and framed by a domestic culture imported from elsewhere; other pupils immigrated to Ireland with their parents, having undergone primary socialization and perhaps attended school in their country of origin. The extent to which immigrant families are in contact with other speakers of their home language in Ireland is infinitely variable, as is the strength and frequency of contact with their country of origin. Plurilingual families whose repertoire includes a variety of English (for example, those from Nigeria) often choose to speak English at home, so their children don't acquire their parents' other language(s) of origin. Some immigrant communities organize weekend schools to support the development of literacy in their language, though there is no guarantee that Scoil Bhríde's pupils attend. Finally, the socio-economic diversity of immigrant families is reflected in great diversity of educational background, experience and achievement. Most immigrant parents have received at least basic education in their language of origin and can help their children to learn to read and write in their home language. When parents are not functionally literate in their home

language, the school offers to put them in touch with other speakers of the language who can help with their daughter's literacy development in their home language.

2.3 Scoil Bhríde's policy and practice

The essence of Scoil Bhríde's educational policy and pedagogical practice is simply stated: EAL pupils are encouraged to use their home languages at school for whatever purposes seem to them appropriate. In Junior Infants, in the period of play that begins each school day, they communicate in their home language with other pupils who speak the same or a closely related language, and this continues during breaks in the school yard. But as they progress through the school, EAL pupils also use their home languages in pair and group work, presenting their results to the teacher and the rest of the class in English. Each day some lesson time is devoted specifically to Irish, and Irish is also used to some extent in the teaching of other curriculum content. For example, in Junior Infants pupils learn to count from one to five, first in English and then in Irish, and this creates an opportunity for EAL pupils to teach their classmates how to count from one to five in their home languages. The same procedure is applied to teaching about colours and shapes and in playing action games. In this way, all pupils quickly grow accustomed to learning in a multilingual community and pick up fragments of one another's languages. With multiple languages continuously in play, identifying and discussing similarities and differences between them becomes an obvious and inevitable part of teaching and learning. Like other schools, Scoil Bhríde delivers English language support to small groups of pupils; but it includes native speakers of English in these groups, recognizing that they are an important part of the support system while themselves benefiting from the specific focus on language. The learning outcomes achieved by Scoil Bhríde are summarized in the remainder of this section.

2.3.1 Language awareness

From an early age, pupils display high levels of linguistic self-awareness. For example, a Second Class pupil (7 years old) whose home language was Slovakian explained: *I speak normally Slovakian … we speak in school and on yard we speak* [English] *… and then … Polish because I understand Poland because it's similar and sometimes we speak together and … and next I … Irish because sometimes we speak in classrooms and* [the Irish textbook].

When asked where she spoke Slovakian she said: *I speak Slovakian at home and when we come to Slovakian so then we speak Slovakian*. She said she used English *in school, when we play on yard and yeah with teacher*, and explained that *sometimes when teachers come, we say "Dia dhuit fáilte romhat isteach"*. Asked about her writing skills, she said she could write *some in Irish like "is maith leat". I can write some sentences, and English I normally write, and Slovakian I really good, I really know how to write that, and Polish no, I just understand*.

Linguistic self-awareness sometimes morphs into more general language awareness. Another Slovakian speaker, this time in Senior Infants (5 years old), was singing an action song in Irish. The song contained a number of words with the /ch/ sound, which she produced very competently. Watching the child's performance, a Special Needs Assistant whose home language was Italian complimented her on her use of 'that strange /ch/ sound in Irish'. The pupil responded indignantly: *It is not a strange sound. That sound is in my language too.*

When introducing and discussing new concepts, teachers routinely ask EAL pupils to contribute words from their home languages for purposes of comparison and contrast. This has a strong positive impact on the development of pupils' English vocabulary. For example, fractions are introduced in Third Class, when pupils are 8½+ years old. One teacher did this by associating *fraction* with *fracture* and eliciting synonyms (*break*, *split*). She also asked for words for *break* in other languages. A Romanian pupil offered *rupt*, which others were quick to link to the *eruption* of a volcano, *interruption* and *disruption*. Also in a Third Class maths lesson, the teacher asked "What is an oblique line?" Another Romanian pupil suggested that it was like *oblig* in her language, which meant *something you must do.* When the teacher explained the difference between *oblique* and *oblige,* an Irish pupil noted that *obligatory* is like Romanian *oblig*, and a Filipino pupil offered *obligate*. A Lithuanian pupil then answered the teacher's original question: *There's an oblique line on the end of the letter q.*

2.3.2 Proficiency in Irish

Pupils develop high levels of proficiency in Irish. Scoil Bhríde has a long-established tradition of teaching Irish through Irish, and (as noted above) Irish is sometimes used in lessons whose purpose is not primarily to teach the language. Teachers often address pupils in Irish outside the classroom and expect them to reply in Irish. This emphasis on Irish as a medium of

everyday communication is reinforced by paying a great deal of attention to the development of pupils' literacy skills in Irish. Stories of various kinds are used for this purpose. For example, the teacher may have heard that one of the pupils had an accident when playing in the park. She discusses this with the class in Irish and they gradually produce a coherent narrative that the teacher writes on the whiteboard and the pupils copy into their copybooks. For homework she gives them the task of translating the story into English. This encourages EAL pupils to produce a second translation, into their home language. In this way, Irish acts as a sort of hinge between English and EAL pupils' home languages: its presence in daily communication outside as well as inside the classroom creates a social space in which other languages can be used. Throughout the school Irish benefits from the high levels of interest in languages and language learning that Scoil Bhríde's open language policy stimulates. It also benefits from the fact that the minority of pupils who are English-speaking like to think of Irish as their "home" language. It is no accident that Scoil Bhríde is ranked in the top 12 per cent of primary schools for achievement in Irish.

2.3.3 Literacy in home languages

It is fundamental to Scoil Bhríde's inclusive language policy that pupils from immigrant families should transfer their emerging literacy skills in English and Irish to their home languages. Pupils begin to write in Senior Infants, when they are 5½+ years old, and from the first they produce parallel texts in two languages – English/Irish or English/home language (Figure 1). Parents play an essential role in supporting the development of home language literacy, but some pupils soon develop the capacity to write without assistance. For example, in First Class (6½+ years old) a Latvian pupil wrote a short identity text in English and Russian in class without any help (Figure 2). By the time they reach Sixth Class most EAL pupils are able to write parallel texts in three or four languages. When they were coming to the end of the school year, one Sixth Class asked their teacher if they could organize a fashion show. She agreed on two conditions: all languages present in the class – English, Irish, French (introduced in Fifth Class) and home languages – must be used in the show; and each pupil must imagine a model and write a short text about her in as many languages as possible. A pupil from a Chinese family produced texts in English, Irish, French and Mandarin in the person of Marceline (Figure 3). It should be noted that the

Figure 1: Identity text written by a Polish pupil in Senior Infants (5½+ years old)

length of these texts was determined by the task; Scoil Bhríde's pupils routinely write much longer texts in their various languages.

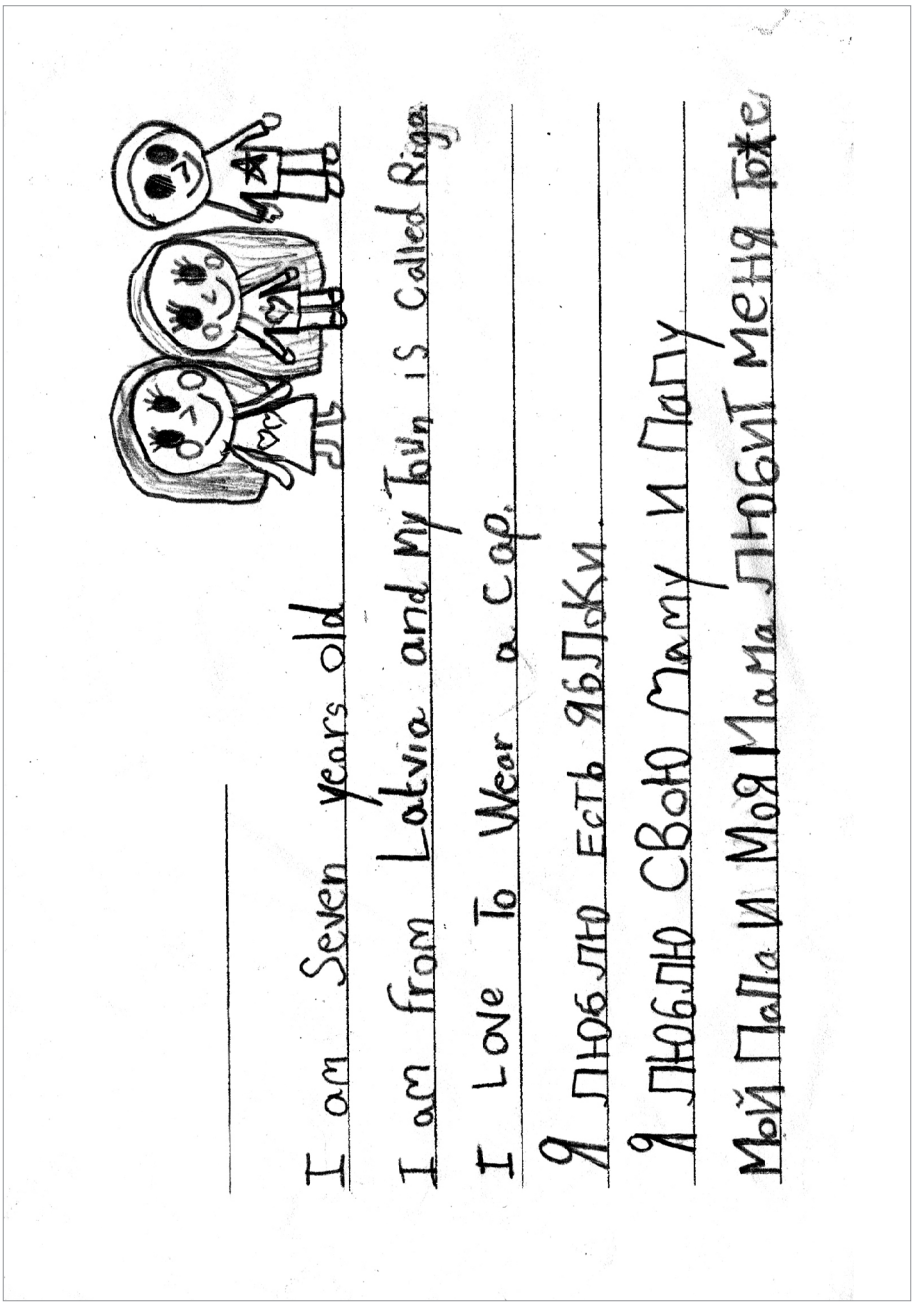


Figure 2: Identity text in English and Russian written by a Latvian pupil in First Class (6½+ years old)

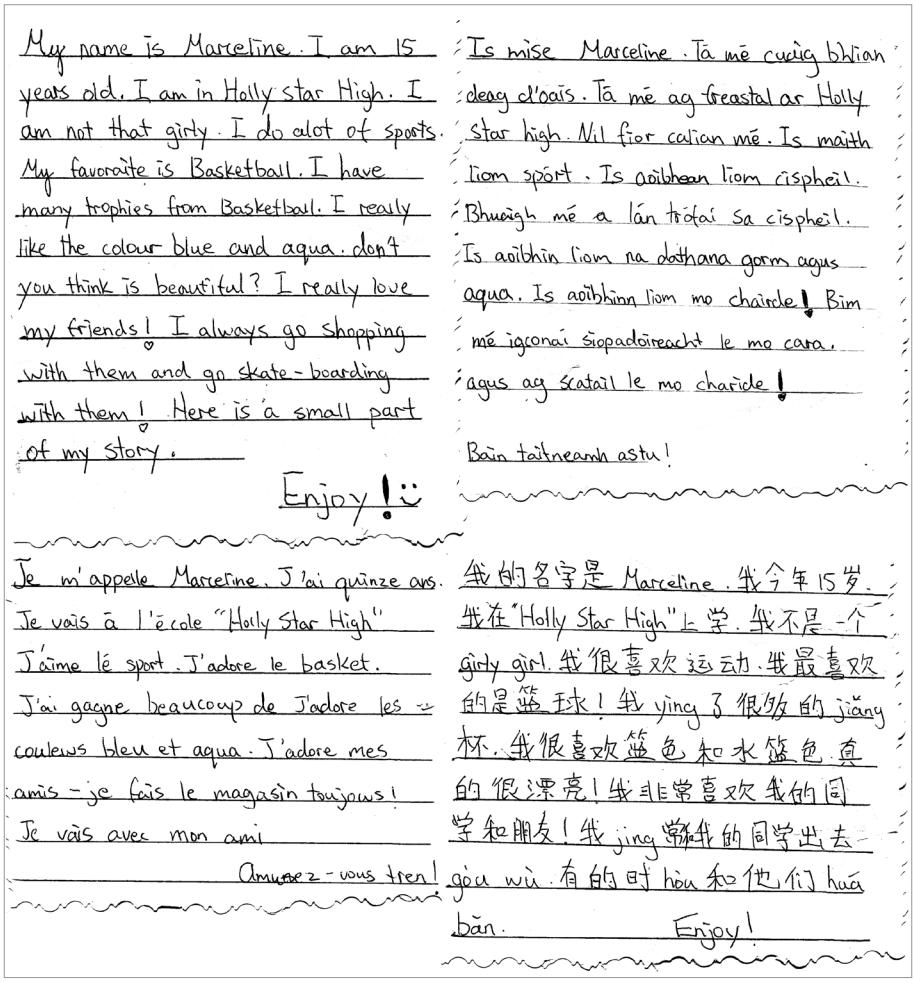
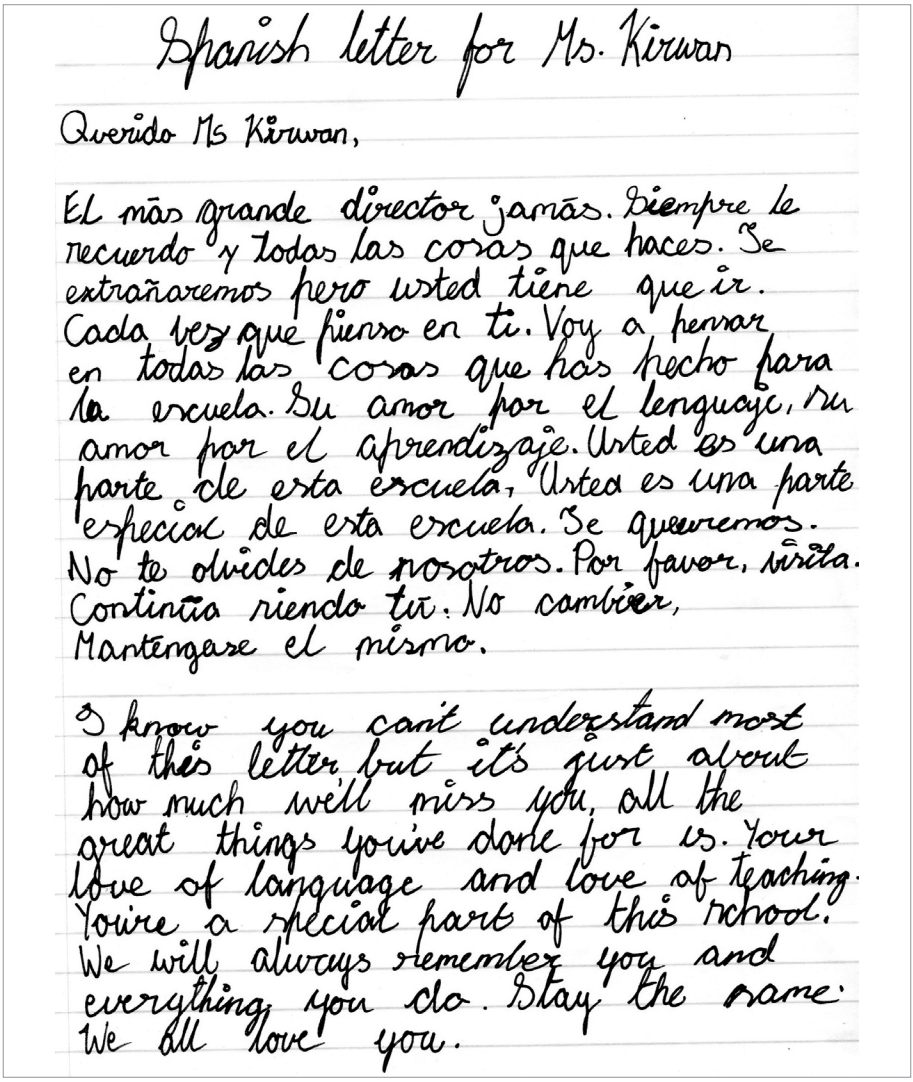


Figure 3: Four texts (English, Irish, French, Mandarin) written in the person of Marceline by a Chinese pupil in Sixth Class (11½+ years old)

2.3.4 Autonomous language learning initiatives

From an early age, pupils undertake ambitious language-related projects of their own devising and in addition to the work required by the teacher. For example, to celebrate the European Day of Languages, one Second Class teacher taught her class the song "It's a Small World". The pupils then decided to ask their parents to help them translate the chorus into their respective home languages. For a week they spent breaks in the school yard teaching one another the various versions until the whole class was able



Spanish letter for Ms. Kirwan

Querido Ms Kirwan,

El más grande director jamás. Siempre le recuerdo y todas las cosas que haces. Se extrañaremos pero usted tiene que ir. Cada vez que pienso en ti. Voy a pensar en todas las cosas que has hecho para la escuela. Su amor por el lenguaje, su amor por el aprendizaje. Usted es una parte de esta escuela, Usted es una parte especial de esta escuela. Se queremos. No te olvides de nosotros. Por favor, visita. Continúa siendo tú. No cambies, Mantengase el mismo.

I know you can't understand most of this letter but it's just about how much we'll miss you, all the great things you've done for us. Your love of language and love of teaching. You're a special part of this school. We will always remember you and everything you do. Stay the same. We all love you.

Figure 4: A letter in Spanish and English written by a Sixth Class pupil (11½+ years old) who had taught herself Spanish

to sing the chorus in eleven languages. When Déirdre Kirwan visited the class, the pupils were able to sing the Italian version of the chorus without prompting or hesitation.

To mark her retirement, all pupils were required to write Déirdre Kirwan a letter of thanks and good wishes in two languages. A Sixth Class pu-

pil from a Nigerian family wrote in Spanish and English (Figure 4), though there is no Spanish in her family background and Scoil Bhríde doesn't teach Spanish. It turned out that she had taught herself the language. She explained that she had found two Spanish textbooks in the school library, one of which had a CD; then she acquired *a book to say what a chair is in Spanish or put a chair into a sentence*; and she got a *verbal book to learn my nouns and proverbs and stuff like that*. Asked whether she used Google Translate, she said she did *if I want to do something quick … but usually I use my own words and see if Google Translate can get it right*.

2.3.5 Pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem

When interviewed by Déirdre Kirwan towards the end of their time at Scoil Bhríde, EAL pupils exhibited high levels of self-confidence and self-esteem that were directly related to the role their home languages were playing in their education. Asked how they would have felt if they had not been allowed to use their home languages at school, they replied in strongly negative terms, using words like *not fair*, *terrible*, *empty*, *rejecting*, *devastated*, *sad*, *very shocking*. When asked about the benefits of using their home languages at school, by contrast, they used words like *advantage*, *exploring*, *expanding*, *warm*, *perspective*, *supports*, *speak out*, *be courageous*. The following two excerpts from transcribed interviews display a self-confidence that arises directly from the value that the interviewees place on their linguistic and cultural identity:

> … sometimes in school we talk about Irish traditions and some people, like, they originally come from Ireland and they already know it and we don't, so when we're talking about our own countries, it's like when they're talking about Ireland, we'd have nothing to relate to or be proud of and to put our name on and so we'd be, like, we'd be empty. 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.
>
> [If he couldn't use it at school] the child's language would get closed inside him and he wouldn't be able to speak it, and I just want to say to other kids out there that if someone is trying to

> hide your language or doesn't want you to speak out loud you should be courageous and just say that you want to speak it.

2.3.6 Standardized tests

Scoil Bhríde performs above the national average in the standardized tests of English and Maths that pupils take each year from First to Sixth Class. What is more, the test results reflect a fully integrated pupil population: English-speaking and EAL pupils do not constitute clearly identifiable subgroups.

3. Explaining Scoil Bhríde's success

Having described Scoil Bhríde's approach in broad outline and given a summary account of its success, we now explore its main features in greater detail. We begin with the learner-centredness of the Primary School Curriculum, which provided the basic justification for Scoil Bhríde's approach.

3.1 The implications of a learner-centred curriculum

Developed through the 1990s, the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) is strongly learner-centred. Its principal goal is to enable pupils to realize their full potential as unique individuals (p. 7); it recognizes that "the child's existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning" (p. 8) and that "the child is an active agent in his or her learning" (p. 8); and it stresses the importance of the life of the home, acknowledging that in the primary years parents are the child's principal educators (p. 24). The curriculum's overarching goal and guiding principles imply a version of the broadly constructivist psychology of learning that has been current in the anglophone world for more than half a century. The central claim of this psychology is that we can acquire new knowledge only on the basis of and in relation to the knowledge we already possess. One influential elaboration of the consequences of this claim was provided by Douglas Barnes in his book *From Communication to Curriculum* (Barnes, 1976), according to which education is a matter of bringing "school knowledge" (curriculum content) into fruitful interaction with learners' "action knowledge" (the complex of experiential knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that shapes their daily lives outside school). Now, the "action knowledge" of Scoil Bhríde's EAL pupils has mostly been acquired in a language that is not a variety of the language of schooling, and it almost certainly includes

cultural elements that are not part of the out-of-school experience of Irish pupils. So if we take the learner-centredness of the Primary School Curriculum seriously we must find ways of including EAL pupils' home languages and cultures in their educational experience.

Scoil Bhríde's decision to encourage the use of home languages in the classroom is diametrically opposed to the widespread practice of banning the use of home languages at school, usually defended on the apparently commonsense ground that the more time pupils from immigrant families spend immersed in the language of schooling, the more rapidly they will achieve proficiency. As so often, however, common sense turns out to be nonsense. To insist that a 4½-year-old child leave her home language at the school gate is cruel, foolish and doomed to failure. Cruel because her home language is central to her identity and her sense of self, so to forbid her to use it is tantamount to suppressing her individuality. Foolish because her home language is her principal cognitive tool, which means that we must find ways of enabling her to use it to learn curriculum content that is delivered in a language with which, to begin with, she is unfamiliar. And doomed to failure because although it may be possible to forbid immigrant pupils to speak their home language at school, the language inevitably persists in the never-ending stream of their consciousness, the inward sound of their identity. Scoil Bhríde's decision to include EAL pupils' home languages in classroom communication was reinforced by an important historical consideration: in the 19th century the use of Irish was forbidden in schools, and this contributed significantly to language loss. Déirdre Kirwan and her colleagues were determined that the same should not happen to their EAL pupils. Their solution had significant consequences for classroom discourse, to which we now turn.

3.2 Teaching and learning through dialogue

In the "recitation" tradition (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), classroom discourse comprises long stretches of monologue from the teacher, interspersed with brief exchanges that follow a fixed three-part structure. The teacher initiates the exchanges by asking a question to check her learners' comprehension; one or more learners volunteer an answer, often no more than a single word; and the teacher provides evaluative feedback before moving on to the next question. By contrast, learner-centred pedagogies seek to engage learners in exploratory talk that brings "school knowledge" into interaction with their "action knowledge". By definition, exploratory talk entails that

learners have the right to introduce a new topic or challenge another learner's or the teacher's view; in other words, it is dialogic in the sense that the power to take discourse initiatives is shared among all participants.

As Alexander (2020) points out, "dialogic" has assumed many different shades of meaning when applied to teaching, pedagogy and education (for two wide-ranging research collections, see Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke, 2015; Mercer, Wegerif and Major, 2019). But all versions of dialogic pedagogy are founded on the belief that educational success is enhanced by interactive talk that respects and fosters the agency of learners by allowing them to take discourse initiatives. By building on one another's contributions they jointly create new knowledge that individual learners could not create on their own (Chi and Menekse, 2015, p. 267). Alexander (2020, p. 131) offers six principles that can be used to guide the planning and conduct of dialogic classroom talk:

- *Collective*. The classroom is a site of joint learning and enquiry, and, whether in groups or as a class, students and teachers are willing and able to address learning tasks together.
- *Supportive*. Students feel able to express ideas freely, without risk of embarrassment over contributions that are hesitant or tentative, or that might be judged "wrong", and they help each other to reach common understandings.
- *Reciprocal*. Participants listen to each other, share ideas, ask questions and consider alternative viewpoints; and teachers ensure that they have ample opportunities to do so.
- *Deliberative*. Participants discuss and seek to resolve different points of view, they present and evaluate arguments and they work towards reasoned positions and outcomes.
- *Cumulative*. Participants build on their own and each other's contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding.
- *Purposeful*. Classroom talk, though sometimes open-ended, is nevertheless structured with specific learning goals in view.

Teachers who follow these principles continue to control classroom interaction. But when they speak for several minutes in order to present new information or provide an explanation, their talk is not monologue in the "recitation" sense but a "long turn" in a learning conversation that is always

open to question, exploration, challenge and (if necessary) a change of direction. Alexander's principles coincide with the learner-centred intentions of the Primary School Curriculum, and they capture the essential purposes and features of the pedagogical approach adopted by Scoil Bhríde.

One consequence of this approach is that lesson plans can easily be diverted. But if teachers are serious about including EAL pupils' home languages and cultural experience in their lessons, they must be prepared to follow where their pupils lead. They may well not understand the insights their EAL pupils offer because they derive from linguistic and cultural experience to which they have no access. But the pupils' efforts to explain their insights increase their own understanding while supporting the development of their proficiency in English. This is infinitely more beneficial than keeping pupils "on task" simply because the task is central to the teacher's lesson plan. When pupils know that they themselves and their contributions are valued, they will be motivated to participate more fully; and when they help to steer the dialogue of learning and teaching, they cannot help but learn. Scoil Bhríde's teachers have discovered that when they welcome their contributions and allow them to offer and explain insights, their pupils' curiosity is engaged and they begin to observe, think and reflect in new ways. This applies to learning across the curriculum, and it makes the teacher's job easier. As one of Scoil Bhríde's teachers said: *When you bring in the home languages the lights come on!* Another teacher described the transformative impact of the inclusion of EAL pupils' home languages like this: *It's not always about what I bring to this group. It's about what I can find that they have to offer to themselves and to others. This changes the way I approach teaching. I could never go back to the way I used to teach before.*

Sfard (2015) has argued that this style of classroom discourse has an important consequence for individual learning. If pupils regularly engage in dialogue that is co-constructive, it's reasonable to suppose that they will work "constructively" on their own: "while thinking, either in words or with the help of any other symbol system, we talk to ourselves the way others have always talked to us and to one another" (Sfard, 2015, p. 249). This may help to explain the combination of ease and enthusiasm with which Scoil Bhríde's pupils undertake ambitious language-related projects on their own initiative.

3.3 Translanguaging

As we explained in section 2.3.3, Scoil Bhríde's pedagogical practice of having pupils produce parallel texts in English and Irish extends to home languages (and in Fifth and Sixth Class, to French; see Little and Kirwan 2019, pp. 112–114). This practice recalls "translanguaging" as it was originally defined and practised in Wales in the 1980s (Lewis, Jones and Baker, 2022, p. 643). At that time there was a scarcity of instructional materials in Welsh, so textbooks in English were used in Welsh immersion programmes but classroom activities were carried out in Welsh (Williams, 2002, p. 36). Translanguaging in this sense means using one language to reinforce another in order to increase understanding and expand the learner's capacity in both languages (Williams, 2002, p. 40). Learners listened and read in English, then spoke and wrote in Welsh, and vice versa. As they switched back and forth between languages, the texts they received and produced in one language were scaffolded by and thus closely similar in content and structure to the texts they received and produced in the other language. The parallel texts produced and shared by Scoil Bhríde's pupils perform the same scaffolding function in the development of their plurilingual literacy. We noted in our introduction that the CEFR defines plurilingualism as "a communicative competence … in which languages interrelate and interact" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4). Translanguaging in its original sense provides us with one way of understanding the verbs "interrelate" and "interact" in this definition: as referring to patterns of language use that promote conceptual and linguistic transfer across languages. This understanding coincides with what Cummins (in press) calls Crosslinguistic Translanguaging Theory, and it is further exemplified in pupils' production of texts that focus explicitly on differences between languages: texts in English that include as many words borrowed from French as possible; narratives in which languages alternate not within but between sentences.

Since Williams first coined the term (in Welsh), the sense of "translanguaging" has been extended to embrace the fluid language use typical of bilinguals (code switching and code mixing) and a wide variety of bilingual pedagogies. Ofelia García and her colleagues have also used the term to question the nature of language itself (see, for example, García, 2009; García and Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García and Reid, 2015). For them, a plurilingual mind possesses not a multiplicity of sometimes overlapping linguistic systems but an undifferentiated unitary system. According to this claim, the verbs "interrelate" and "interact" in the CEFR's definition of plurilin-

gualism refer not to language use but to the properties and internal operations of the plurilingual mind. Proponents of what Cummins (in press) calls Unitary Translanguaging Theory further claim that because bilinguals possess a unitary linguistic system, languages as traditionally conceived – English, Hungarian, Japanese – are social constructs ("named languages") that lack linguistic or cognitive reality. This argument flies in the face of a large body of psycholinguistic research (Singleton, 2016), and it is vulnerable to the charge of internal contradiction. If plurilinguals possess a unitary linguistic system and "named languages" have no cognitive reality, what meaning can the term "translanguaging" itself possibly possess? The educational underachievement of minoritized students has long been associated with societal power relations (Cummins, 1986), and according to Unitary Translanguaging Theory, "named languages", especially their standard varieties, are the principal instruments of oppression. Scoil Bhríde's teachers have never doubted the reality of "named languages", however, and have always treated English, Irish, French and EAL pupils' home languages as discrete entities. Their educational goal is to foster in their pupils the highest possible levels of literate proficiency in all the languages in their repertoire; not to do so would be a betrayal of their professional duty. They empower their pupils by encouraging them to use their home languages in the classroom and engaging them in a learning process that is grounded in dialogue. García (2018, p. 833) has claimed that the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingualism "ignores power imbalances between speakers of different languages". Scoil Bhríde's experience, however, suggests that the effective implementation of plurilingual education depends precisely on ensuring an appropriate balance of power between teacher and learners and among learners.

3.4 Language learning as socialization

Crosslinguistic Translanguaging Theory and the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingualism both imply an educational dynamic in which new languages are learnt on the basis of and in relation to the language(s) learners already know. When classroom discourse is dialogic in the sense we have defined and engages with similarities and differences between the languages in the learners' collective repertoire, language learning, learning through language, and learning about language are integrated into a single complex process; and the process is fed by pupils' production and sharing of texts in multiple languages. But the question remains, how does Scoil

Bhríde launch the learning of new languages, so that EAL pupils become proficient in English, they and their Irish peers become proficient in Irish, and in Fifth and Sixth Class all pupils add French to their repertoires? The answer to this question comes in two parts. The first has to do with the nature of education as a socializing process and the second with the strong emphasis that Scoil Bhríde places on pupils' literacy development and the consequent intertwining of written and spoken language.

Current theories of second language acquisition differ significantly in their view of the cognitive mechanisms that produce proficiency, but they agree that those mechanisms are driven by spontaneous and authentic language use (see, for example, Ellis and Wulff, 2019; Truscott and Sharwood Smith, 2019). In other words, current theories agree that it is impossible to *teach* languages in the traditional sense; the best we can do is create the conditions that enable pupils to *learn* their target language by attempting to *use* it. In Scoil Bhríde's case, those conditions are provided by the social processes of schooling: the daily life and routine activities of the classroom and the diverse extracurricular activities that surround them. Pupils are socialized *through* language as they are socialized *into* language (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2008, p. 5); that is, language is the instrument used to draw pupils into the social processes of schooling, and their participation in those processes secures their language development. Scoil Bhríde's EAL pupils become proficient in English by becoming socialized into the communicative practices of the classrooms through which they pass from Junior Infants to Sixth Class; while all pupils become proficient in Irish by becoming socialized into the communicative practices that their teacher conducts in Irish. In this sense Scoil Bhríde is a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) whose goals and activities are shaped by the Primary School Curriculum; as pupils progress through the school, their developing mastery of curriculum content is impossible to separate from their developing plurilingual repertoires.

This process of language acquisition through socialization is launched on the basis of the knowledge and communicative abilities pupils already possess. We explained in section 2.3 that learning to count in Junior Infants is a multilingual activity. Pupils are taught to count from one to five first in English and then in Irish, after which EAL pupils teach the rest of the class how to count from one to five in their home languages. The inclusion of home languages serves two purposes: it gives Irish pupils an early experience of multilingual communication and at the same time provides EAL

pupils with retrospective scaffolding for the learning of English and Irish. From these simple beginnings, language learning throughout the school is attached to routines that guarantee repeated use of linguistic forms, including formulae, set phrases and idioms. For example, from the first day in Junior Infants, greetings and farewells are exchanged in English, Irish and all the home languages present in the class; after a week every pupil can perform these simple functions in every language present in the class. Opportunities abound to perform more complex activities in multiple languages. For example, as early as First Class a nature walk can be used to teach pupils the English names of trees and birds, which they write in their copybooks; EAL pupils can add the names in their home languages; and on a subsequent occasion the nature walk can be repeated in Irish. Through repetition, the phrases the teacher uses on the walk become a fully embedded part of each pupil's linguistic repertoire and can themselves be used as the basis for further language development. Encouraging pupils to draw a picture of their favourite tree or bird to illustrate their language notes helps to reinforce their learning.

This last example combines language socialization with pupils' literacy development and brings us to the second part of our answer to the question: how does Scoil Bhríde launch the process of learning new languages? In section 2.3.3 we gave some examples of the identity texts that EAL pupils produce in English and their home language; and we've already argued that the production of parallel texts in two or more languages – texts that are as far as possible identical in thematic and discourse structure – provides pupils with a bi-directional scaffolding. The texts reproduced in Figures 1 and 2 express (a small part of) their authors' identity and help to anchor that identity in an emerging plurilingual repertoire. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this fact. From Senior Infants on, all pupils spend a lot of time writing, much of it on their own initiative and for their own enjoyment; in this way they develop high levels of age-appropriate literacy in multiple languages and simultaneously construct a plurilingual identity.

One of Scoil Bhríde's language support teachers used the "language experience" approach to teach English reading and writing to newly arrived EAL pupils who had attended school and learned to read and write in their country of origin. In the "language experience" approach, "matters of form are always encountered in the service of meaning which is located in the learners' experience" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 230), and emphasis is placed on "the importance of children's own language productions as a bridge from

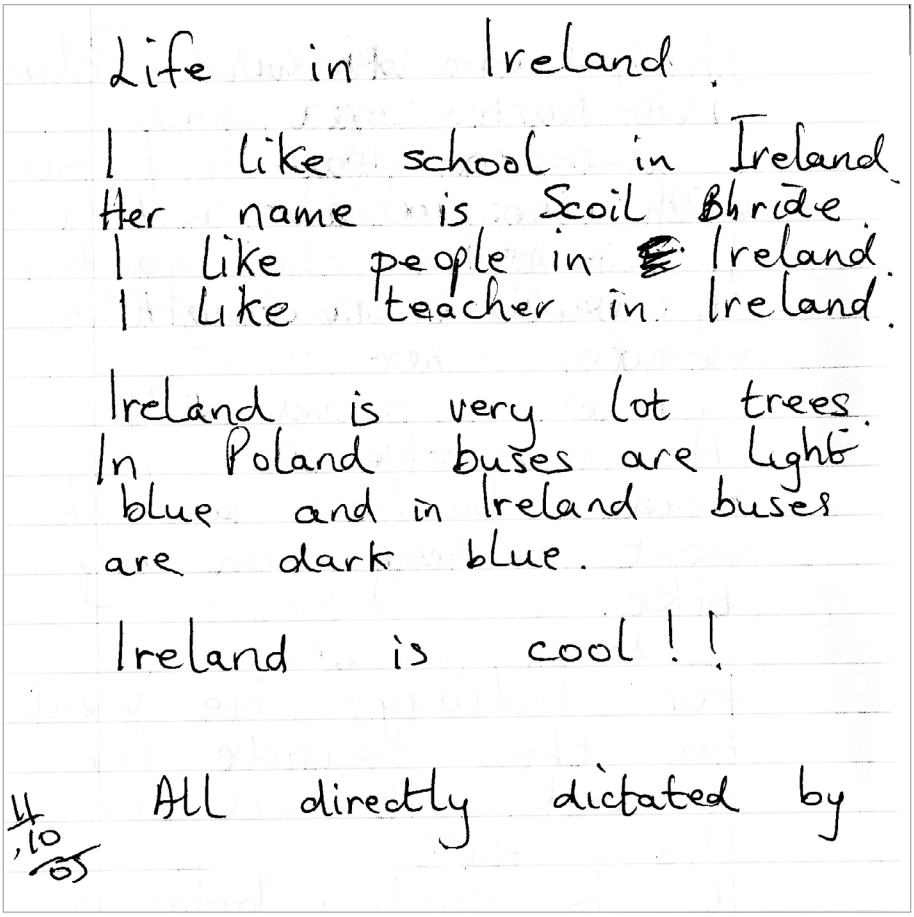


Figure 5: "What are your first impressions of Ireland?" Answer dictated to language support teacher on 11 October 2005 by recently arrived Polish pupil (11 years old)

oral to written language" (Stahl and Miller, 1989, p. 88). A version of the approach was used by Sylvia Ashton-Warner to teach Maori children to read and write English and is described in detail in her classic book *Teacher* (Ashton-Warner 1963/1986). In Scoil Bhríde, the language support teacher wrote down exactly what the pupil said, so that her developing proficiency was captured in writing. On 11 October 2005, for example, the teacher asked an 11-year-old pupil who had recently arrived from Poland for her first impressions of Ireland; Figure 5 reproduces the reply that she dictated to the teacher. Ten days later, on 21 October 2005, the pupil gave the account of her early morning routine captured in Figure 6. The teacher used

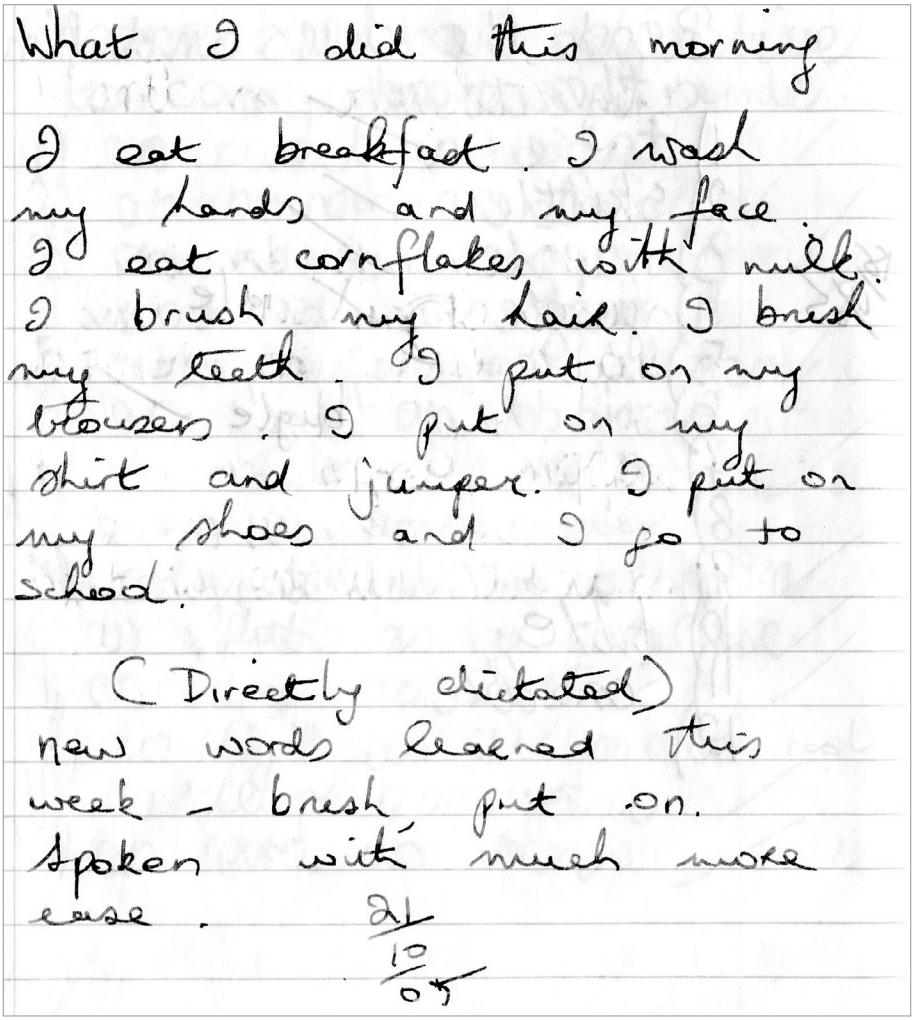


Figure 6: "What did you do when you got up this morning?" Answer dictated to language support teacher on 21 October 2005 by recently arrived Polish pupil (11 years old)

the same technique to help EAL pupils to remember new words; Figure 7 combines sentences written by the teacher and images drawn by the pupil to help the latter to learn the words *heart*, *hat*, *horse* and *hedgehog*. This pupil was the same age as the Polish girl but had come from a war zone and so had not been to school previously.

The "language experience" approach promotes "learning from the inside out": learning that starts from the pupil's perspective and links new

Figure 7: Learning the words heart, hat, horse and hedgehog: sentences written by the language support teacher and illustrated by an 11-year-old EAL pupil from a war zone who had not previously attended school

language to the pupil's interests and identity. The approach also emphasizes the interdependence of speaking and listening, reading and writing.

3.5 Pluriculturalism and interculturality

Culture is popularly thought of as a collection of artefacts produced by societies over time – works of art in various media; institutions and systems of

administration, government and law; architectural styles, modes of dress, food and drink; and so on. This is what people usually have in mind when they compare and contrast national cultures. But culture is also a process: people who live together develop common attitudes, beliefs and patterns of behaviour; and distinguishable cultures in this sense exist at all levels of society – in professional associations, religious denominations, sports clubs, and so on. Each family also has its own distinctive culture. Thus, we are all pluricultural: from a relatively early age we belong to multiple cultures and develop whatever competences are necessary for active participation in them (Byram, 2009, p. 6). Some of the cultures to which we belong overlap with others (we may be members of several sports clubs), while some have nothing in common (the bird-watching group we belong to and the political party we actively support).

When young children first start at Scoil Bhríde, their life has been shaped largely by the culture of the home, though their experience of life outside the home may already have brought them into contact with unfamiliar attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. Whatever their family situation, school exposes them to the cultural practices that shape primary education in Ireland. At the same time, the dialogic and exploratory talk that mediates between school knowledge and their action knowledge allows pupils to contribute fragments of their home cultures to the ever-expanding knowledge of the class. Some of those fragments will be broadly familiar to many pupils, while others are startlingly different; in many cases difference will be linguistic as well as cultural. But Scoil Bhríde's plurilingual and intercultural approach helps pupils to accept novelty and difference with interest and respect, welcoming all forms of diversity for the enrichment they bring: pupils' plurilingualism is matched by pluriculturalism, and both contribute to the development of interculturality.

4. Conclusion

As we said in the introduction, to the best of our knowledge the version of plurilingual and intercultural education implemented by Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) is *sui generis*. It has aroused a great deal of interest in Ireland and further afield, but we are not aware of any attempts to replicate the approach. Clearly, it would be necessary to make adjustments in schools with fewer EAL pupils or fewer home languages; while the essential role played by Irish as a "hinge" between English and EAL pupils' home languages might be played by English in those countries that include the language in

their primary curriculum. But these are matters of detail. Successful replication of Scoil Bhríde's approach will depend not on the percentage of pupils from immigrant families or the number of home languages present in a given school, but on the school's commitment to underlying principles: learner-centredness, dialogic pedagogy, translanguaging, language learning as socialization, a "language experience" approach to the teaching of reading and writing, pluriculturalism and interculturality.

Scoil Bhríde's approach also has implications that reach far beyond the primary sector. On the day that we wrote this conclusion, the *Irish Times* published an interview with Andreas Schleicher, special adviser on education policy to the secretary general of the OECD (*Irish Times*, 22 March 2021, p. 4). According to Schleicher, Irish education is "very much 20th-century" in its infrastructure and architecture, "quite industrial in its outlook and design": "Students get taught one curriculum. It's quite heavily focused on the reproduction of subject matter, and not that much focused on getting students to to think out of the box." These thoughts are not new; for many years they have figured prominently in the national debate about the future of education. They are seriously limited, however, by the fact that they say nothing about language. Without *language* there can be no education, without *languages* there can be no plausible 21st-century curriculum, and without *multiple languages* there can be no truly inclusive education. The example of Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) suggests that any attempt to rethink the goals and modalities of education should begin with language; for when the delivery and processing of curriculum content is inseparable from the development of learners' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires, learner empowerment is likely to stimulate thinking "out of the box".

References

Alexander, R. (2020). *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Ashton-Warner, S. (1986).*Teacher*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (First published 1963)

Barnes, D. (1976). *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Byram, M. (2009). Multilingual societies, pluricultural people and the project of intercultural education. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168052223c

Cavalli, M., Coste, D. Crişan, A., and van de Ven, P. (2009) Plurilingual and intercultural education as a project. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?-documentId=090000168o5a219f

Chi, M. T. H., and Menekse, M. (2015). Dialogue patterns in peer collaboration that promote learning. In L. B. Resnick, C. S. C. Asterhan, and S. N. Clarke (eds.), *Socializing Intelligence through Academic Talk and |Dialogue* (pp. 262–274). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association

Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cummins, J. (1986) Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review* 56, 18–36.

Cummins, J. (in press) Translanguaging: A critical analysis of theoretical claims. In P. Juvonen and M. Källkvist (eds.) *Pedagogical Translanguaging: Theoretical, Methodological and Empirical Perspectives*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Ellis, N. C., and Wulff, S. (2019). Cognitive approaches to second language acquisition. In J. W. Schwieter and A. Benati (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Learning*, pp. 41–61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

García, O. (2009). *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

García, O. (2018).The multiplicities of multilingual interaction. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism 21*(7), 881–891.

García, O., and Li Wei (2014) .*Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Government of Ireland (1999) *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction/Curaclam na Bunscoile: Réamhrá*. Dublin Stationery Office.

Ivanič, R. (2004), Discourses of writing and learning to write. *Language and Education 18*(3), 220–245.

Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, , G., Jones, B., and Baker, C. (2012). Translanguaging: Origins and development from school to street and beyond. *Educational Research and Evaluation 18*(7), 641–654.

Little, D., and Kirwan, D. (2019). *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity: A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Little, D., and Lazenby Simpson, B. (2009). Teaching immigrants the language of the host community: Two object lessons in the need for continuous policy development. In J. C. Alderson (ed.), *The Politics of Language Education: Individuals and Institutions*, pp. 104–124. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Mercer, N., Wegerif, R., and Major, L. (2019). *The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Dialogic Education*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Ochs, E., and Schieffelin, B. (2008). Language socialization: An overview. In P. A. Duff and N. H. Hornberger (eds), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education (second edition), Volume 8, Language Socialization*, pp. 3–15. New York: Springer.

Otheguy, R., García, O., and Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review 6*(3), 281–307.

Resnick, L. B., Asterhan, C., and Clarke, S. N. (eds.) (2015). *SocializingIntelligence through Academic Talk and Dialogue*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Sfard, A. (2015). Why all this talk about talking classrooms? Theorizing the relation between talking and learning. In L. B. Resnick, C. S. C. Asterhan and S. N. Clarke (eds.), *Socializing Intelligence through Academic Talk and Dialogue,* pp. 243–252. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Singleton, D. (2016). A critical reaction from second language research. In V. Cook and Li Wei (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Multi-competence*, pp. 502–520. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stahl, S. A., and Miller, P. D. (1989). Whole language and language experience approaches for beginning reading: A quantitative research synthesis. *Review of Educational Research 59*(1), 87–116.

Tharp, R. and Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Truscott, J., and Sharwood Smith, M. (2019). Theoretical frameworks in L2 acquisition. In J. W. Schwieter and A. Benati (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Learning*, pp. 84–107.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, C. (2002). *A Language Gained: A Study of Language Immersion at 11–16 Years of Age*. Bangor: University of Wales, School of Education.