

Applying a Plurilingual Approach to Literacy Across the Curriculum: Reflections on the Language Explorers Initiative in Irish Primary Schools

Dr Francesca La Morgia

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University

Introduction

The cultural and linguistic diversity of today's Irish society is reflected in every school around the country, where the indigenous languages English, Irish, Cant and Irish Sign Language are present alongside more than one hundred migrant languages.

The mainstream primary education system currently tends to focus only on the curricular languages English and Irish while heritage language transmission is the responsibility of families, communities and local initiatives. However, the role heritage languages play for a child's development of academic skills as well as their psychosocial wellbeing is recognised in the Irish Primary Language Curriculum, which encourages teachers to enhance children's skills through their entire linguistic repertoire.

Irish primary school teachers possess all the tools needed to foster linguistic diversity in the classroom because the richest source of knowledge are the children themselves. Teachers' ability lies in using this knowledge in the class and turning it into a pedagogical tool. Irish teachers have an advantage over primary school teachers in other countries because they have either been educated through Irish or they have been taught Irish throughout their formative years so they have experience of language learning and bilingualism. The fact that Irish plays such an important role in education and that all primary teachers are bilingual makes the Irish context a very fertile environment for reflecting on language use, on formal aspects of language and literacy and on the creativity that translanguaging can bring to the curriculum.

This paper presents a reflection on the experience of Language Explorers, an initiative aimed at introducing awareness of linguistic diversity through activities linked to the curriculum to encourage children to develop an interest in languages, reflect on diversity and to challenge stereotypes.

Plurilingualism in the family context

Not all children growing up in bilingual households are bilingual. Some parents believe that their child's academic achievement will be greater if they can minimise the influence of the home language and assimilate into mainstream English speaking society. However, research shows that bilingualism does not hinder language development nor academic achievement, and it carries great cognitive

benefits (Bialystok, Craik & Luk, 2012). Dual language acquisition is the result of exposure to quality input in two languages (Unsworth, 2016) and the input in the heritage language is usually provided by parents in the early years. Studies suggest that for heritage languages to be sustained over time the family needs to rely on additional sources of input through interaction with peers, with community members and other institutions that promote the language (Kravin, 1992). A recent study on heritage language maintenance in Ireland (Frese, Röder & Ward, 2015) highlights the tension between the parents' desire to transmit their language to their children and the reality of the dominance of English once the children start school. Most parents who participated in this study showed a very positive attitude to the maintenance of the heritage language, but many also placed great importance on their child's mastery of English, especially with a view of preparing the child for school:

"[...] some families at some point switched from making a strong effort to teach the heritage language to prioritising English. The example of children who were sent to live with grandparents in their parents' countries of origin illustrates this point: when back in Ireland, parents began speaking English at home to prepare their children for school in order that they 'not fall behind' or 'not be perceived as an immigrant', highlighting the tension between wanting to maintain the heritage language on the one hand, and the importance of acquiring fluency in English on the other despite a strong desire for both."
(Frese, Röder & Ward, 2015: 14)

The lack of parents' awareness of the benefits of maintaining the home language paired with the many challenges they face in finding time, resources and both institutional and community support contribute to the shift towards an increase in the use of English as a family language. The emphasis schools place on achieving good skills in English and Irish can be interpreted as a refusal of other languages (Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007). It is therefore important to start a conversation with families to encourage them to continue fostering heritage languages throughout the primary school years.

Plurilingualism in the school context

The report by Frese, Röder and Ward (2015) identifies the start of school as the point in which parents' efforts are confronted with greater challenges presented by homework and by an increase in the child's use of English for academic and social purposes. While the role of English cannot be underestimated, schools have a role to play in shaping children's relationship with their heritage language. When children only use English in school heritage languages can be hidden and they can just be a 'home language' that gets celebrated alongside dishes and dances during the annual "intercultural fair'. In fact, whenever a debate about bilingual children emerges, the focus is placed on

EAL, on challenges with English language support and on integration of migrant children, so the issue of the loss of a heritage language may seem of secondary importance. However, the Primary Language Curriculum encourages teachers to support pupils in their use of all the languages that make up their repertoire and international research shows that translanguaging allows for transfer of language and literacy skills with a great potential for beneficial effects in academic proficiency (Berthele & Lambelet, 2018).

Good models of plurilingual teaching are adopted throughout Europe. Amongst the core principles of intercultural and plurilingual teaching practices the Council of Europe mentions the importance of allowing everyone to exercise the right to use their language varieties as a medium of communication and a vehicle for learning and it values the role of experiencing otherness through languages and the cultures they carry. Plurilingual approaches to teaching are implemented both in monolingual and in bilingual schools, and the success of these approaches has been widely documented (Berthele & Lambelet, 2018, Cummins 2000, Little & Kirwan 2019).

A plurilingual approach to teaching enhances language awareness and recognises the diversity of language experiences and skills of all children. Heritage language speakers benefit from using their mother tongue because it eases the transition from home to school and because it values their identity and their experiences outside the school. When pupils feel that their languages and cultures are affirmed they are more likely to develop a strong sense of identity (Reyes, 2001). Using heritage languages in the classroom also benefits children who only speak the majority language, who gain a better understanding of how other people express themselves and they develop openness, respect and intercultural competence. In this context Irish becomes a language that is used alongside other languages, not just English, and it therefore becomes a rich source of knowledge that children and teachers can tap into. For children who are new to the majority language (usually referred to as EAL in the Irish context) being able to use the heritage language allows them to rely on knowledge they have developed in their early childhood to transfer literacy skills and learning strategies.

The Primary Language Curriculum encourages teachers to embrace a plurilingual approach to teaching and to make links between English, Irish and other languages for the enhancement of children's language and literacy skills (NCCA 2015). Teachers can create a linguistically diverse environment by making heritage languages and Irish visible in school displays of artwork, images and other elements that appear on the school walls. Another fundamental step in implementing this approach is discussing the use of languages in the school with parents and pupils to make them aware that translanguaging is a successful pedagogical approach and that the heritage languages that children speak at home are a valuable learning resource for the child and the whole school community.

It is a common belief that a plurilingual approach is valuable only in very diverse classes. However, this is a misconception. All children in any context can engage in discussions about their experience of language learning, about accents and language varieties and about the languages they hear and see in their surroundings. If there is a lack of speakers of different languages, online resources and visits by native speakers who live in the local community can contribute to the exploration of linguistic diversity.

Language Explorers: developing a framework for Irish primary schools

The importance of valuing the range of children's experiences is highlighted throughout the primary curriculum and language is an excellent catalyst for the expression of diversity across all subjects. It is important to remember that when a child speaks a language other than the majority language in a public space they are exposing themselves and showing that they are different from the majority. This applies to foreign languages as well as Cant and Irish, but it is also true for accents that are associated with a given social group. Linguistic diversity can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

This is expressed by the quote below from a teacher interviewed as part of a research study in the United States:

"I have found the study of language variations to be a wonderful way to address differences between people, and this aspect of [the dialect curriculum] has been the most valuable part to me and my students. Discussing bias in relation to language is a non-threatening way to begin thinking about biases in general." (Fields-Carey & Sweat, 2010: 272).

It is common for schools to hold celebratory days in which children have the opportunity to share their parents' cultures by talking about them, showing pictures of grandparents living abroad, creating displays, sharing food or wearing traditional clothes. While the value of such days are not to be underestimated, it is important to recognise that linguistic and cultural diversity are part of the fabric of the school every day, and not only on one special day of the year. Therefore, if the school values the importance of diversity as a rich learning resource, its role has to permeate more aspects of the educational experience of all children.

The Language Explorers activities

Language Explorers is an initiative designed to promote an interest in languages from an early age and to raise awareness of linguistic diversity in the classroom and in the community. The activities are strongly linked to the Primary Language curriculum. Children discover the origins of words, they recognise sounds of familiar and unfamiliar languages, they learn new words from many different languages, as well as reaching a deeper understanding of the languages they use in school and at

home. Language Explorers focuses on the development of language awareness by exposing children to sounds, words and scripts from many different languages, commonalities and differences between languages, activities to use the home language through homework and in class, awareness of the linguistic landscape in their immediate surroundings and an understanding of the histories of different languages and the groups who speak them. Language Explorers was delivered as a four week block of classes in two primary schools in Dublin and more than 500 children took part in the activities. The activities were delivered in every class weekly for a month by facilitators who were speakers of foreign languages and had experience working with children.

The range of activities varied depending on the age of the children. All classes took part in activities that linked language to art, music and literacy, some of which are summarised below:

Art: multilingual Dublin collage

Collage was used as a technique to design a multilingual city. Children were split into groups and they were given images of people representing various ethnic groups, of bilingual road signs in Irish and English, of buildings in the local area that carry signs in different languages (for example a local Halal shop or Polish shop), and many blank road signs and buildings that they could creatively personalise. The prompt was for the children to design a multilingual city using as many languages as possible by using the materials available and by adding their own languages. Once the collage was complete pupils were asked to name as many items on their collage in the languages of the group and to write those in small bubbles or clouds that they would later stick onto the picture. The facilitator and the teacher would help with words in Irish and in the facilitator's native language.

Literacy: cognate words

Cognate words are similar in meaning and form. As for the art project the activity can be adapted to various age groups, leading to a range of interesting discussions about spelling, about similarities between languages and about the origin and history of families of languages. After finding out which languages the pupils were familiar with or they are interested in a list of cognate words and non-cognate words was brought to the class. Five pictures were accompanied by 10 words in 10 different languages. Each picture had to be matched to the right words. An example was the word volcano. Children looked at the picture and immediately identified the English word. Two words on the list were vulcano (Italian) and vulkán (Hungarian). These were easily identifiable and all children could make this match. After matching the words, children had to write down the name of the language. They could guess or ask their classmates if they didn't know. Since the languages chosen were those spoken by the pupils, at least one child in the class knew the answer. Unsurprisingly, children who chose to guess the answer made guesses which were very close to the correct answer, and they always

assigned languages to the right family (for example if they didn't know the target answer was Spanish, they might say Italian or Portuguese which are also Romance languages). In some cases the two words were not cognate. An example was the word fish, listed in Polish (ryba) and in French (poisson). Again children were asked to link the object to two words and to identify the languages. At the end children could write all the words into a table and identify those that were cognate and those that were not.

This activity led to discussions about similarities and differences between languages, and Irish as well as the children's languages were always used to show examples and to make comparisons.

Music and words: a multilingual rap song

Exposing a child's identity is not always easy. As children get older they become more and more aware of their friends' opinions and attitudes, and if their plurilingual identities have been hidden up to this point it can be difficult to expose them. Children can feel very vulnerable when showing a part of their identity that makes them different and they may be afraid to be teased. Music can help by creating a relaxing atmosphere. We created a short and simple multilingual rap song in sixth class. Children were guided in deciding together in small groups on a character, a way this character moves and where it goes, who it meets, and what happens as a result of this meeting. The groups had to write a few short lines that answered the questions, creating a very short story. A rap track was played to them several times. This gave pupils the rhythm of what they had to work towards. Rap was a style that everyone seemed to be familiar with and the pupils knew how to sing along to the track.

The facilitator selected 10 lines in 10 different languages and pieced them together to create a coherent story. The pupils who wrote the line in a different language taught the whole class how to pronounce it, and everyone had to sing the 10 lines together. Singing together made the experience easier for the pupils who were more embarrassed of making mistakes. It was also a very powerful experience for pupils whose languages had never been used before to see their classmates using their language while having fun and creating something together.

Reflections

All children from 1st class upwards filled out a feedback form using stickers to reflect their opinion on the experience. The majority said that they had fun and wished to take part in the activities again.

From the point of view of the facilitators, some points emerged which can be useful for teachers who want to facilitate such activities. The most common reflection from the facilitators was that language awareness is a process that takes time and children might take two to three sessions before they feel

comfortable speaking their heritage languages or playing with language, which for many is a new and unexplored area. It was clear from the very start that a single class only started to awaken the children's sensitivity to issues surrounding language. As part of this reflection, it was agreed that Language Explorers would run as a series of a minimum of three sessions to have the greatest impact on children. For teachers implementing such activities it would be ideal to make activities on linguistic diversity part of the regular routines and to include all children in the process.

Another important point that emerged was that after the sessions were over children continued to apply the same process of reflection about language to many other activities. It was clear from the facilitators' and the teachers' feedback that the activities had opened a new line of communication with the children and their families. A clear example of this was the fact that children continued to bring objects with languages on them long after the sessions were over, showing that they continued to notice languages in their home environment. Another reflection concerned the Irish language. The more we discovered languages around us, the more children reflected on similarities and differences between the languages they knew or they had heard, and many children used Irish in very creative ways. It was apparent that these activities had instilled a sense of identification with the Irish language especially for children who did not speak a foreign language. It is therefore worth exploring language awareness and linguistic diversity as a route to develop an interest in multilingualism and in minority languages. One of the observations from the facilitators was that the pupils opened up about their experiences of speaking a foreign language at home, they spoke about family members living abroad. This was common for children from migrant families but also for children whose parents had always lived in Ireland. Since migration is a common experience for Irish people, many children had relatives living abroad and some had cousins who are growing up speaking English alongside another language. In some cases, children had lived in more than two countries (also as refugees) and had learned the languages of these countries, but this experience may not have been shared before with the whole class. Facilitators found that the discussion topics raised while engaging in the activities allowed children to learn something new about each other and to really value language knowledge. Using the home language in class allowed children who had just started learning English to show their own literacy skills and to be appreciated for what they can do and for the wealth of knowledge they have gained in their early years. One of the most memorable experiences was watching a pupil who had just recently moved to Ireland read in the language of her country of origin. Up to that point she had mostly used facial expressions and gestures to communicate with her friends, and during one of the activities she asked if she could read in her own language in front of everyone. Children were surprised to hear her voice reading out loud and to see her so confident in doing something she was very good at.

Conclusions

Language is a very powerful tool for intercultural communication, for understanding the experiences and the perspectives of others and for enhancing awareness of diversity. The Language Explorers initiative has proved to be a suitable approach for Irish primary school classrooms and this initial pilot project has served as a way of identifying activities that allow all children to participate equally.

Observations from teachers, parents and pupils have led to the following recommendations:

1. Developing awareness of linguistic diversity should be a long term commitment.

Language Explorers is an initiative that promotes a plurilingual approach to teaching. Since the goal is to embrace plurilingualism across the curriculum and to allow children to use their entire language repertoire, this cannot be solely implemented in a one off fashion. This is a process that takes time in order for the whole class to fully reap its benefits.

2. Language should be used a creative tool. For many the experience of learning language and literacy skills may be associated with achieving mastery through correction of errors, spelling and pronunciation practice. However, language itself has much greater potential for the expression of creativity if we put aside our vision of achieving mastery by focusing on form. When languages come together, mix and contribute to creative expression the outcomes are fascinating. Language is very flexible and creative tool that can permeate any aspect of the curriculum and the potential of translinguaging in class should be exploited.

3. Languages are for everyone. The majority of children in mainstream schools are able to use at least one language and have the ability to learn more languages. All children should be encouraged to think about linguistic diversity and to explore its possibilities, irrespective of their language knowledge and abilities.

The activities proposed as part of the Language Explorers initiative have been published in an activity book (La Morgia, 2018) that teachers can use as a starting point to develop their own plurilingual approach to suit their own setting. The experience of this pilot project triggered numerous reflections on how to implement the Primary Language Curriculum, teacher training in the area and the importance of linking in with families in this process. In order to fully evaluate the benefit of such intervention, a systematic study should be designed to measure the impact and the potential benefits of such project for teachers, pupils and the whole school community.

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