



# **Integrating non-English speaking pupils into the school and curriculum**

## **Handbook for primary schools**

**Prepared by Integrate Ireland Language and Training  
in collaboration with language support teachers  
working in primary schools throughout Ireland**

**2003**  
(revised 2005)



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## 18. MISSION STATEMENT

*English Language Support in primary education strives to empower pupils from many different communities to access the same educational opportunities as their English-speaking peers and to become fully-integrated members of the community of the school and the wider social community, while respecting and valuing the richness of cultural and linguistic diversity.*

(With thanks to *Scoil Muire Ogh II, Dublin*)

## INTRODUCTION

This handbook is based on the experiences and ideas of language support teachers working with non-English speaking non-national children in primary schools throughout Ireland.

The purpose of the handbook is to answer questions that may be raised by others in the school - principal, class teachers etc. and to raise awareness to the work of language support and its scope and limitations.



### 1 What is the legal status of newcomer pupils?

The legal status of the family is irrelevant to the child of primary age. All children have a right to education and this is not affected by the status of their parents. Legal status does, however, become an issue when the child reaches third level.

- 1 A child may come from a family of **asylum seekers**. In this case the family is in an uncertain situation while waiting for the decision on their application for asylum. Parents are not entitled to work. The family may be living in direct provision (e.g. hostel, hotel etc.) and there may not be good facilities for studying or doing homework. Children living in a hostel may have problems socializing with Irish peers because it is difficult to invite other children home, have parties etc.
- 2 The child whose family has **refugee status** has all the rights of the Irish child. The parents are entitled to training, education and work. The family will live in rented or purchased accommodation.

- 3 Children of **EU nationals** have all the rights of Irish children. In general they are in Ireland because parents are working here.
- 4 Children of **non-EU migrant** workers. The parents of these children are in Ireland on a Work Permit or Work Visa. This is generally for a specified length of time. Typical of this group is the many children whose parents are working in the hospital/medical sector. Some of these children will spend five years in Ireland and then continue their education elsewhere.
- 5 **Unaccompanied minors** or separated children are those children and teenagers who have been ‘sent’ to Ireland by their families. They are in the care of the Health Boards. Children of primary age may be living with foster families.



## 2 What is the best way to deal with the newly arrived pupil?

### **School starting age**

It is important to remember that in many countries children would not normally begin school until 6 or 7 years of age. The new pupil, therefore, may never have experienced a school environment before, even though he or she is, for example, 8 years of age. The pupil may, therefore, require support in **understanding the most basic routines** of the school day and the classroom.

### **The ‘Silent Period’**

On arrival in the new school, it is not unusual for the pupil to suffer a type of ‘**culture shock**’ because he or she is surrounded by unfamiliar activities, language, and people. Some pupils lapse into silence and it may take several months before they develop the confidence to emerge fully from this. There is a well recognized and well-researched phenomenon known as the ‘**Silent Period**’, which is a response demonstrated, in particular, by younger children when surrounded by an unknown language. The silent or non-verbal period does not signal learning difficulty or disability but is a period during which the child listens and learns but does not communicate openly.

This period may last for many months, indeed some children in Irish schools have spent up to one school year in relative silence. It is important during this time that children are not subjected to additional stress by referral for psychological testing, for example. When children emerge from the silent period there is overwhelming evidence of the learning that has taken place in the absence of spoken communication. (See *Checklist for observing responses and development during the ‘Silent Period’*, IILT Teachers’ Manual.)

### **Working with the language support teacher**

It has been noted frequently that newcomer pupils **first develop confidence** in the language support class where they may be talkative and fully engaged in learning. At the same time they may be quiet, unresponsive and apparently unwilling to participate in the mainstream classroom. This is a question of security and confidence and, in this case, the classroom teacher can gain insights into the pupil's *real* personality and ability by liaising whenever possible with the language support teacher.

### **Supporting the early steps into integration in the school**

Both mainstream and language support teachers can help the pupil achieve **social integration** in the classroom and playground as quickly as possible by:

- Ensuring that the newly arrived pupil can understand and use the basic language of the classroom (e.g. toilet, be quiet, copy from board etc.)
- Equipping the pupil with knowledge of the rules and procedures of the school so that he or she does not unwittingly infringe these rules (it may be necessary to demonstrate these by miming etc.)
- Helping the pupil to understand different norms of behaviour that may exist in the new culture/society (in classroom, school, playground etc.)
- Helping to build the confidence and self-esteem of the pupil who may feel different, excluded and less able than those around him or her.

It is important that teachers throughout the school are aware that newcomer pupils may be in a totally alien environment and that the normal 'culture' of the school is unknown and incomprehensible to them. In many cases they will not be able to depend on parents for explanation and preparation.



## **3 How can the language proficiency and existing education of newly arrived pupils be assessed?**

Trying to achieve **accurate assessment of a new pupil on arrival is both difficult and unwise** for the following reasons among others:

- The pupil may be suffering from 'shock' and may be unable to communicate
- The pupil's previous formal education may have been interrupted, minimal or non-existent
- The pupil may have been told by parents not to 'give information' about anything
- Concepts are not necessarily taught in the same order in different educational systems and the pupil may not recognize what is being taught in the class.

The initial interview assessment (IILT) helps to define broadly the level of the pupil's **English language proficiency** on first meeting. However, real ability and interests will only emerge over time as confidence develops. An **on-going observation** period should be used (for example a four-week period). During this time the language support teacher and mainstream class teacher should observe the pupil's communicative ability, level of literacy, and coping skills in the classroom. The combination of information from both teachers will allow an accurate profile to be identified and will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the pupil.

It is important to remember that newcomer pupils may also be **ahead of peers** educationally.



## 4 What is the rôle of the language support teacher?

### What is the language support teacher?

A language support teacher is sanctioned for a school when the number of non-English speaking non-national pupils requiring help with language exceeds 3 in the school. Between 3 and 13 pupils the support is based on grant assistance which allows for the provision of teaching hours and the acquisition of resources.

With 14 pupils a temporary full-time position is sanctioned for the duration of the school year. An additional start-up grant for resources is made in the first year and a smaller top-up grant for resources is made in subsequent years. All information about grant assistance and sanctioning of temporary posts may be found in the booklet *Information booklet for schools on ASYLUM SEEKERS* (Department of Education and Science). Applications for posts and grant/assistance or grants for resources should be applied for as soon as the school meets the numbers specified. It is unusual for grants to be issued retrospectively.

The **primary responsibility** of the language support teacher is to support the pupil's development of **English language proficiency** so that he or she can gradually **gain access to the curriculum**, ultimately achieving the same educational opportunities as English-speaking peers by:

- Working in collaboration with the mainstream class teacher to set relevant and achievable learning targets for each pupil
- Preparing the pupil, on an on-going basis, to access mainstream learning, initially in part and later more fully
- Helping the pupil to develop appropriate strategies and skills to support future formal education in general.

The responsibility of the language support teacher is to deliver a programme of English language tuition which is **based on the primary curriculum** (see *Language Proficiency Benchmarks IILT*) and which prepares and supports the child in:

1. Accessing classroom learning
2. Socializing with peers.

Evidence from other parts of the world clearly indicates that the development of the language essential for school learning and socialization provides a sound basis for the child's **ongoing acquisition** of language outside the classroom. It is essential, therefore, that language support in the school is firmly focused on the linguistic demands of life in the school and curriculum learning.

The language support teacher, however, **cannot 'teach the curriculum'** and this remains the rôle and responsibility of the mainstream teacher. Pupils spend the greater part of their week in the mainstream classroom and attend language support for a small proportion of specialized class time. The benefit of this time, which is focused on English language learning, can be maximized through **liaison and a flow of information** between the mainstream teacher and the language support teacher.

At present, each pupil requiring English language support is allocated a two-year period of support on a withdrawal basis. Whether the child begins school in September or at a later point of the year, he/she is entitled to **two full school years of support**. It is critically important that **the pupil does not lose language support time** during these two years as this will inevitably have a negative effect on his or her progress and ultimate potential.

When a pupil has additional difficulties such as a low literacy level, it may be appropriate for him or her to receive **learning support** after this time.



## 5 What are the basic resources and facilities needed for effective language support?

Because effective language learning requires constant reinforcement and the revisiting of previously learnt information, it is important that **a room is dedicated** to language support. This allows for posters to be kept on the walls to support on-going learning and for the collection of a wide range of suitable resources such as books, posters, pupils' work, real-life objects, tape recorder, computer etc.

Where possible, liaison between the **language support** and **learning support** teachers has proved to be very valuable as much material used for learning support is suitable for different stages of language learning. Learning support teachers have been very helpful in providing this support in schools throughout the country.

A **start-up grant** for resources is provided by the Department of Education and Science. In addition, a **wide range of suitable materials** has been developed by Integrate Ireland

Language and Training which is distributed free of charge at in-service seminars each school year.



## 6 What are the challenges and possibilities facing the mainstream teacher?

For the mainstream class teacher, the introduction of non-English speaking pupils into the class is a challenge. Drawing the newcomer pupil into classroom activities can require time, planning and thought, all of which are difficult to allocate in a busy classroom. However, close **cooperation with the language support teacher** can result in the child being prepared for classroom activities so that he or she is able to work on the same things as peers, perhaps in a reduced or slower way.

If the class teacher informs the language support teacher about **forthcoming themes, units** etc. then it will be possible for the child to gain some access, even in part, to what is planned for the class. If the class teacher can also **keep the language support teacher informed** about how the pupil is reacting in class, coping with classroom language, interaction etc. then these matters can also be addressed in language support sessions.

It should be noted, however, that in the limited contact time that the language support teacher has with each pupil, it is not possible for the entire curriculum to be taught. It is rather a case of opening the doors to learning so that the pupil can gradually begin to gain more and more benefit from the mainstream class.

### **Pupils in the mainstream classroom with low levels of English language**

When a pupil's level of proficiency in English is extremely low, for example in the early weeks after arrival, access to mainstream class learning may be virtually impossible. During this time it makes sense for the pupil to continue, in the mainstream classroom, **work that has been started in language support sessions**. This makes valuable use of class time, keeps the pupil focused, and supports English language development.

This is particularly important for older pupils (Senior Primary for example) who, if not able to engage with the mainstream class, may become disruptive and generally demotivated. **Liaison with the language support teacher** allows for language learning activities to be provided for use in the mainstream classroom. This provides relevant work for the pupil, allows him or her to have a sense of purpose while in class, and supports progress in language learning. Examples of text-book and work-book based activities are provided in the book *Using school texts for language support in primary school* (IILT, 2003).



As English language proficiency develops, it is appropriate for the pupil to engage more with mainstream learning activities, even if this engagement is at a partial level.



## 7 How can the pupil be supported in engaging with the curriculum in general?

**The sole purpose of language support is to allow the child to gain access to mainstream learning and to socialize within the community of the school.** Language proficiency in other areas will develop naturally as the child interacts with peers.

The language support programme, based on the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks for primary learners*, reflects the thematic demands of the primary curriculum. The development of the Benchmarks was informed by focus groups of primary teachers working with non-English speaking pupils.

### Young children

For children entering primary school at the level of Junior or Senior Infants, they will inevitably develop literacy, classroom language, vocabulary and so on at the same rate as their peers. The ‘difference’ between the young child and the English-speaking peer group is small.

### Older pupils

However, older children entering the classes of Senior Primary can experience a greater challenge. They have a more developed **sense of ‘difference’**, which can create a barrier to settling down, integrating, and engaging with learning.

The problem is magnified if the child:

1. Has not attended school regularly in the past
2. Is not literate in the Roman alphabet
3. Has never gained literacy in any language.

Pupils have presented with this additional complication up to the age of twelve. In this case the language support teacher will first have to address the question of literacy. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that the pupil should be assigned **exercises to do in the mainstream classroom** to support language and literacy development. These activities may not relate to what is happening otherwise in the classroom.



## 8 Why record newcomer pupils' progress?

It is vitally important that a record is kept of the pupil's linguistic development. This development is key to all future educational achievement. Language support teachers record achievement on a **Pupil profile** which provides an instant overview of what the pupil 'can do'. Additional information from **observations by the mainstream class teacher** is important to the development of this profile.

The stage of linguistic development reached by the pupil will determine the amount of language support that will be necessary. This will allow the decision to be made to **reduce or terminate language support**. It is important that the pupil engages fully with mainstream learning as soon as possible.

For some pupils, the two-year period of language support may not prove sufficient to ensure that they can access mainstream learning at an appropriate level. The Department of Education and Science will consider '**special cases**' but it is essential that these applications can be accompanied by detailed information about the child's stage of linguistic and learning development.

Even after language support has ended, there are occasions when the non-English speaking pupil may need reassurance or some particular support. Many full-time language support teachers have introduced **an 'open' period** each week when pupils can come to discuss a particular language difficulty or can be referred by the class teacher for some extra support. This system has worked well.



## 9 How can we establish successful communication with parents?

Achieving satisfactory communication with parents can present some difficulty, particularly if parents have little English themselves. It is frequently the case that the language support teacher becomes the first main point of contact for new parents. However, it is also important that parents meet class teachers and get an overall view of their children's progress.

Different approaches have been developed in schools around the country. These approaches include:

- Language support teacher having a regular time each week to meet newcomer parents
- Ensuring that the time allocated to meeting parents is longer than would be necessary for English-speaking parents (to deal with communication difficulties)

- Meetings with parents to encourage them to become involved in their children's work
- Invitations to parents to work in the language support classroom
- Meetings organized with class teachers and language support teachers together
- Language support teacher being present at all school events
- Open afternoon once a month when parents visit school and view their children's work

These and other ideas are listed in the document '*Creating an intercultural environment: Experiences and ideas provided by teachers*' which has been collected by IILT.

In addition, IILT has developed *Parent-teacher meeting report forms* to help support communication with newcomer parents.



## 10 How can we deal with problems of poor attendance?

In general, those issues that arise with newcomer pupils that may also arise with Irish pupils should be treated in the same way by the school. Poor attendance, therefore, should be addressed through the normal procedures. However, particular difficulties may arise with children from the Roma community (families of ethnic gypsy origin, typically from Romania or the Czech Republic). Roma families tend to be highly mobile. As a result, children may attend one school for a short time, may then disappear from that school only to appear in another in a different part of the country. Steps are being taken to make contact with parents, where possible, to inform them about their legal obligations with regard to the education of their children and to encourage them to support the on-going education of their families. Schools can help to support the continuation and coherence of a child's English language development by ensuring that the child's *European Language Portfolio* is sent to the next school.



## 11 What can the school do if there is evidence of corporal punishment in the home?

The use of corporal punishment is considered, by some cultures, to be an entirely acceptable means of giving care, reinforcing learning and 'forming the character' of children and adolescents. Children may be punished in different ways in their homes. Parents may also expect that teachers will use such means to discipline, punish, and reinforce school learning with their children. The booklet for parents, produced by Integrate Ireland Language and Training and the Reception and Integration Agency (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform) (translated into 10 languages) highlights the fact that such methods of punishment are **illegal** in Ireland.

Nonetheless there is wide evidence of children receiving punishment in their homes for activities, mistakes, bad marks etc. that occurred in school. Teachers' concerns about the physical/mental abuse of their pupils outside school should be followed up through implementation of the **usual procedures that apply to Irish children.**



## **12 What can be done about suspected psychological problems?**

It is important not to assume that **language learning difficulties** are manifestations of psychological or learning problems. The '**Silent Period**' is a particular example of how low levels of language proficiency affect the participation of the child in all school activities.

Language support teachers have a **checklist** which allows the teacher to identify and record when communication is occurring in the absence of speech. If there is evidence that non-verbal communication is occurring on a regular basis, it is unwise to seek psychological assessment as this could cause the child to become further de-stabilized.

If there is evidence of **real psychological or behavioural problems**, the same procedure should be followed as for an Irish child. For **behavioural problems** the Local Health Boards should be contacted. For **learning problems**, NEPS should be consulted. In any event, parental permission must be sought in the first instance and seeking parental permission for assessment can be problematic. Due to their vulnerability, for example as asylum seekers, some parents are unwilling to allow their child to be 'questioned'. In some societies there is a considerable stigma attached to psychological matters and this may also be an obstacle to gaining parental permission.



## **13 How can the school create an intercultural and inclusive community?**

With the introduction of pupils from different cultural backgrounds to the community of the school, issues can arise that were not evident before. The failure of newcomer pupils to integrate into the school may be due to ethnic or religious constraints that preclude involvement in many activities, or may be due to racist attitudes on the part of other pupils.

In recent years material has been developed to support the integration of pupils from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and to create an inclusive school environment.

Some materials and activities are intended for use in particular classes such as SPHE while other approaches are intended to span the curriculum.

For example. *Celebrating difference promoting equality*, defines the attitudes and values, skills and capacities, and knowledge and understanding that children need to develop. This resource pack was developed in collaboration with practicing teachers by the Targeting Educational Disadvantage Programme and the Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research at the Curriculum Development Unit in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (2002).

The NCCA has produced cross-curriculum guidelines for primary schools.

IILT has produced a set of simple **checklists** (at the back of this booklet) which allow a principal to assess what actions are already being taken in the school and to explore other possibilities for making the school more inclusive.

### **The role of the language support teacher in intercultural learning**

The language support teacher is an invaluable resource for mediating activities to contribute to intercultural understanding. He or she gains many insights into the lives, traditions, beliefs and values of newcomer children through close contact in small language support groups. Regular or sporadic involvement of the language support teacher in mainstream classes has proved to be very effective in many schools. In some schools the language support teacher has a regular timetable for attending mainstream classes to carry out intercultural learning activities.

Language support teachers around Ireland have contributed to an extensive **list of activities** that have been tried and tested in different schools. The activities are grouped under four headings, *the physical environment*, *encouraging activities between native and newcomer pupils*, *bringing parents together*, and *supporting communication between school and parents*. These suggestions are distributed to language support teachers at in-service seminars held by IILT.



## **14 What is the role of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT)?**

**Integrate Ireland Language and Training** was set up by the Department of Education and Science in 1999. Among other activities it is responsible for the development of materials to support the learning of English as a second language in schools (primary and post-primary); and the presentation of materials, methodology and supplementary aids via an ongoing in-service training programme for language support teachers.

Before the in-service programme began, the Department of Education and Science commissioned IILT to analyze the linguistic demands of the primary and post-primary curricula and identify the language needed by non-English-speaking non-national pupils in order to participate fully in the educational process. The *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* which reflect the linguistic demands of the primary and post-primary curricula respectively have been in use in schools throughout the country since their introduction in the autumn of 2000. These Benchmarks form the basis for language support, assessment and monitoring of newcomer pupils in schools.

In-service seminars for language support teachers are held in five locations around Ireland twice in each school year. For further information:

Website: [www.iilt.ie](http://www.iilt.ie)

E-mail: [info@iilt.ie](mailto:info@iilt.ie)



## 15 What about exemption from Irish?

Pupils may be exempted from Irish in limited special circumstances. Parents must apply to the principal of the school for exemption, specifying on which grounds exemption is being sought. The school authorities must then prepare a report and file any documentary evidence that is provided in support of this application (e.g. reports from a psychologist, medical specialist, teacher etc.). All relevant documents must be retained by the school for inspection by authorized officers of the Department. In addition, a copy of the exemption certificate must be sent to the Department of Education and Science, Post-primary Administrative Section, Tullamore, Co. Offaly within one week of the granting of exemption. This information and the certificate are available from the Department of Education and Science's website.

When a child has exemption from Irish, even at an early stage of education, this exemption accompanies the pupil throughout primary and post-primary education. Rule 46 of the "Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools" defines the grounds on which exemption may be allowed. The grounds that **may** be relevant to primary-age pupils include:

Specific Learning Disability

Pupils from abroad who have no understanding of English when enrolled

Full details of this Rule may be seen on the website of the Department of Education and Science or in Circular Letter M10/94.

While there is no evidence that younger children have any problem with learning Irish with their peer group, for those entering primary education in the higher years with little English language proficiency, this may become an additional learning burden.

It is worth noting that newcomer children do not have pre-formed attitudes to learning Irish and, as a result, can be a very positive influence in the Irish language class. It is

unwise, therefore, to assume that enforcing an exemption from Irish is essential for every non-English speaking child. Furthermore, for those children who continue to make their lives in Ireland, the fact that they have not learnt Irish could mitigate against them in the future.



## 16 Do schools have any official access to interpreters?

The Department of Education and Science will fund the provision of an interpreter but only in **exceptional situations of extreme concern**. The problem should be discussed in advance with the Department, before any decisions are made.



## 17 Checklists

This set of checklists has been derived from practice in a number of countries where experience of newcomers is extensive. It is likely that many of the points on the checklists are already in place in Irish schools, or can be implemented with relative ease. Some, however, may be more difficult to plan, organise or implement.

The checklists provide a quick and easy means for school principals to identify the extent to which a school is supporting newcomers and, at the same time, supporting teaching staff in the challenge of working with pupils whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds can place constraints on integration and learning.

The checklists are categorised under the headings, *environment at a whole-school level, assessment and placement, inclusivity in the mainstream classroom and provision of language support*.

### **Future directions**

Inevitably, as experience with a multicultural environment grows, principals, teachers and pupils themselves will be able to contribute to a more extensive view of how to address this emerging situation effectively and with the best results for all concerned. However, the path to good practice must begin at some point with the ultimate objective of identifying what is ‘best practice’ for the Irish context.

**CHECKLIST 1:**

**ENVIRONMENT AT A WHOLE-SCHOOL LEVEL**

		YES	NOT YET	NOT APPLICABLE
1	Notices, display material etc. acknowledge and provide positive images of different ethnic groups			
2	The reception area has multilingual welcome notices, a world map indicating where pupils come from (including different parts of Ireland), photographs showing the diversity of the school population, a list or graph indicating the range of mother tongues represented in the school etc.			
3	There is a clear and sympathetic reception process in place			
4	Parents of new pupils receive the 'booklet for parents' produced by the Dept of Justice and IILT			
5	New pupils receive a 'starter kit'			
6	Classroom and library material reflects positive images of ethnic and cultural diversity			
7	Artwork reflects the cultural profile of the school			
8	Games and hobby activities in the school can adjust flexibly to support inclusion.			
9	Funds can be accessed to support extra activities (trips, equipment etc.)			
10	Special events are scheduled throughout the year to mark <b>all</b> cultures and heritages represented in the school			
11	Pupils who are already bilingual are given training to act as assistants			
12	Anti-racism education is included as a natural part of the curriculum			



**CHECKLIST 2:  
ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT**

		<b>YES</b>	<b>NOT YET</b>	<b>NOT APPLICABLE</b>
1	There is a planned procedure for assessment of each new pupil over an initial period of several weeks (see IILT guidelines)			
2	The pupil's English language proficiency is assessed on an on-going basis in relation to the Language Proficiency Benchmarks (IILT)			
3	On-going observational assessment in the mainstream class is used to determine educational background (when this is unclear)			
4	Opportunity to learn is considered when planning mainstream classes (e.g. group work, peer support etc.)			
5	An assessment portfolio is maintained for each pupil from the day of arrival which focuses on, <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. psychosocial adjustment,</li> <li>2. language learning</li> <li>3. continuity of academic learning</li> </ol>			

**CHECKLIST 3:  
INCLUSIVITY IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM**

		<b>YES</b>	<b>NOT YET</b>	<b>NOT APPLICABLE</b>
1	There is a protocol for introduction of new pupils into the classroom			
2	All pupils and teachers are aware of the importance of pronouncing the names of new pupils correctly			
3	Newcomers are introduced to other pupils who speak the same language where possible			
4	The teacher makes personal contact with a newcomer at least once during each class session			
5	Teachers use team-building activities as a natural part of the class programme			
6	Pupils often work in collaborative groups			
7	Classroom routines are predictable and explicit			
8	Classroom displays are inclusive			

**CHECKLIST 4:  
PROVISION OF LANGUAGE SUPPORT**

		<b>YES</b>	<b>NOT YET</b>	<b>NOT APPLICABLE</b>
1	Language support is provided in relation to the <i>Language Proficiency Benchmarks for Post-primary Schools</i>			
2	The amount of support to be provided is calculated with reference to the guidelines produced by IILT			
3	The development of English language proficiency is monitored in relation to performance in the curriculum (see checklists provided by IILT)			
4	Liaison between class teachers and language support teachers is used to focus the programme of support			
5	Feedback on progress is provided to class teachers			