LEARNING OUTCOMES IN PLURILINGUAL ENVIRONMENTS: REFLECTIONS ON CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT

A series of papers on perspectives on learning outcomes in curriculum and assessment

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Dr Déirdre Kirwan is a former principal of Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), a primary school in Dublin. Seventy-five percent of the school's enrolment consists of pupils from more than 40 cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In 2008, Déirdre received the European Ambassador for Languages award for her promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity in the school. The following year, she received a PhD from Trinity College for original research in the area of language education. She has presented papers on the topic of multilingual education both nationally and internationally. She also delivers courses to teachers at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She is strongly committed to the promotion of plurilingualism at primary level and is currently exploring, with teachers, parents and pupils, the benefits of an integrated approach to language teaching and learning in her school. Déirdre's most recent publication, entitled 'From English Language Support to Plurilingual Awareness', can be found in D. Little, C. Leung and P. Van Avermaet (Eds) (2014) Managing Diversity in Education, (pp. 189-203), Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Foreword

This paper is one of a number of short papers on learning outcomes in curriculum design that have been commissioned from a range of authors with a view to informing and supporting curriculum and assessment developments in early childhood, primary, junior cycle and senior cycle. The papers have been commissioned to support dialogue and engagement on the nature of learning outcomes across developments.

The papers are intended to support reflection on the nature of learning outcomes, their relationship with other curriculum components, with existing school culture and in particular their impact on teaching and learning. The papers provide a reference point for clarifying the nature of learning outcomes that will be relevant to the process of curriculum development from early childhood, through primary school to the end of senior cycle. They can provide a strong theoretical basis for the kind of learning outcomes included in curriculum and assessment specifications across these sectors.

The papers represent different perspectives on learning outcomes; critics of learning outcomes approaches have also been commissioned to provide their perspectives. The papers represent the views of the individual author. While these papers have been commissioned by NCCA it should not be implied that the NCCA recommends, endorses or approves these views.

Introduction

The national strategy for literacy and numeracy states that 'a learning outcomes approach [is] to be incorporated into all curriculum statements at primary level' and that 'Curricula should state clearly the skills and competences expected of learners' (DES 2011: 45). The following statements express principles on which the curriculum is based:

- the child is an active agent in his or her learning
- the child's existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning
- collaborative learning should feature in the learning process (Government of Ireland 1999: pp. 8, 9).

The centrality of language in the learning process is stressed:

> *Much learning takes place through the interaction of language and experience. Language helps the child to clarify and interpret experience, to acquire new concepts, and to add depth to concepts already grasped (p. 15).*

This paper will explore the idea of using a Learning Outcomes approach to the teaching, learning and assessment of languages within the primary school. Since the introduction of the primary curriculum in 1999, Ireland has experienced enormous demographic change that has significantly altered the composition of classrooms all over the country. The wide diversity of languages and cultures,[1] to be found among our school-going population, in addition to concerns about levels of English literacy and perceived diminution of competence with regard to the Irish language (Harris 2006) has created a need to re-assess our approach to the teaching and learning of language. In what follows, it will be argued that an integrated approach to language teaching and the cultivation of plurilingual learning environments can be successfully employed in Irish schools. *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* (IILT 2003), derived from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001), provide a target-oriented, outcomes-based system that has been designed for use in language learning situations. With their capacity to combine curriculum,

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[1] The 2011 census shows 199 nationalities living in Ireland. (Census 2011)

pedagogy and assessment it will be argued that the *Benchmarks* are an appropriate tool to use for this purpose.

Definitions

English Language Proficiency Benchmarks have already been adapted and used with pupils for whom English is an additional language in Irish primary schools. Derived from the CEFR, they were developed to facilitate the design and delivery of English language support for learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL). They are focussed exclusively on the communicative needs of the primary curriculum and refer to the minimum proficiency required for full participation in mainstream education. In addition to supporting learning that is developmental as well as pedagogical, they are a useful tool for assessing pupils' language learning outcomes. Pupils' expected learning is divided into receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (spoken interaction, spoken production and writing). The *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* describe three levels of communicative language proficiency: A1 – Breakthrough; A2 – Waystage; A3 - Threshold.[2] These levels correspond to the first three, of six, levels of the CEFR and are based on the language requirements of the primary school curriculum (IILT, 2006: 36). They define what a pupil should be able to do in terms of vocabulary control; grammatical accuracy; phonological and orthographic control. They reflect elements of the organisation of language curricula in countries such as Canada, Scotland and Wales, where an integrated approach to language teaching and learning is taking place. The learner-centred structure of the *Benchmarks* allows for self-evaluation and tracking by pupils as they advance at their own rate, through the various stages of their developing language proficiency. The targets and outcomes described by the *Benchmarks* describe overall or global proficiency levels with respect to language activities of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Table 1 describes the proficiency level of a learner at the first level (A1) in the skill of Listening using the theme *Our School*:

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[2] In the case of the *Benchmarks,* A1 describes the first, or minimum, level of proficiency. Each subsequent benchmark indicates next level of language proficiency.

A1 Breakthrough	
Listening	• Can understand basic school and classroom rules when they are explained very simply and with appropriate gestures.
	• Can recognise and understand the names of school equipment, resources, etc., when they occur in instructions
	• Can understand and follow basic instructions from peers for playing games in the playground (IILT, 2006: 43).

Table 1: Proficiency of a learner at level A1: Listening. Theme: Our School

Proficiency levels in all language skill areas are restated in relation to 13 curriculum themes (Table 2). As they are particularly relevant to learners in primary schools, these themes provide a good starting point for teaching and learning additional languages.

Curriculum Themes	
1	Myself
2	Our school
3	Food and clothes
4	Colours, shapes and opposites
5	People who help us
6	Weather
7	Transport and travel
8	Seasons, holidays and festivals
9	The local and wider community
10	Time
11	People and places in other areas
12	Animals and plants
13	Caring for my locality

Table 2:Curriculum Themes

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) (Council of Europe 2006), which consists of three parts: the Language passport; Language biography and Dossier, is designed to provide a

6

record of learners' proficiency in relation to additional language(s) within their competence. It has a pedagogical function that includes the promotion of plurilingualism and cultural awareness, together with the language learning process and the cultivation of learner autonomy. Using the *Benchmarks* in conjunction with the ELP, allows assessment of proficiency in a given language to be achieved in terms of language use and language competences. Initially, *Benchmarks* and the ELP were adapted from the CEFR for use with EAL learners in Irish schools. As a current, valuable resource used to inform the teaching and learning of EAL, they could be used to equally good effect with pupils for whom Irish and modern languages are additional languages.[3]

The nature of the *Benchmarks*, with their action-oriented 'Can do' approach to the description of language proficiency, when used in conjunction with the ELP, has the potential to support the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for the purposes of ensuring that targeted skills can be accomplished by the learner. The 'I can' statements of the ELP describe the level of demonstrable outcomes or competences achieved by learners at the end of a learning experience. In the case of Table 3 (below), the learning outcomes for level A1, Listening in the theme Our School are stated clearly and unambiguously. Because they are spread across three proficiency levels, i.e., A1, A2 and B1, these 'I can' statements cumulatively record progress over time.

Our School: Listening A1
I can understand some of the things that the teacher says in class.
I can understand the names for things in the school.
I can understand when my friends tell me how to play a game.

Table 3 Outcome achieved at the end of a learning experience.

The CEFR, from which the *Benchmarks* derive, has been designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive foundation on which to build language syllabi, curricula, pedagogy and assessment (Council of Europe 2001). It has the capacity to provide continuity

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[3] Both Benchmarks and ELP, adapted for Irish primary schools can be found at www.ncca.ie/iilt

across sectors from early childhood education, through primary and post-primary schooling on up to degree level. As such, it is particularly suited for use in the present educational climate in Ireland that seeks to focus on the idea of learning outcomes from early childhood learning through primary school and beyond (NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2010; DES, 2012). It provides a clear focus on what is to be learned, how this may be achieved and the means to assess whether the planned outcomes have taken place. It is designed to support autonomous learning and self-evaluation, both characteristics of the primary curriculum, in addition to being sufficiently comprehensive to allow for learning beyond the stated target level (Government of Ireland 1999: 7, 8).

Theoretical Perspectives

The benefits to be derived from knowing more than one language, of learning languages in an integrated manner rather than in isolation from one another, and of the importance of incorporating pupils' home language in the learning process, have been articulated by many researchers. These benefits include enhanced cognitive and linguistic functioning and increased metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 1991; Cummins, 1978; Little, 2008). Cummins (1991) refers to the interdependence of languages, maintaining that where instruction in first language (L1) is effective in promoting proficiency in that language, the skills learned will be transferred to the second language (L2). In effect, this means that learning is enhanced when languages are taught with reference to each other, contributing to the development of more complex cognitive skills that allow literacy in one language to be used as an aid in developing literacy in further languages (Swain *et al.* 1990; Cummins 2000; Little 2008).

Since the publication of the CEFR, the Council of Europe has promoted the idea of plurilingualism, acknowledging that each individual's plurilingual repertoire is unique, and is developed through a variety of both formal and informal language learning experiences. Levels of language proficiency will vary from one language to the next, e.g., it may be possible to read a language without being able to express oneself orally. Similarly, an individual may have the necessary listening skills to follow a radio programme, without having the proficiency to express in writing what has been heard (for further discussion see Kirwan 2015).

Following the principle that 'the child's existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning' (Government of Ireland 1999: 8), it is important to remember that when children come to school, including those for whom neither English nor Irish is a first language, they bring with them their personal linguistic repertoires and varying degrees of language proficiency – their 'action knowledge' (Barnes, 1976: 81). Barnes points out that very often, what children learn at school remains external to them. It is only when 'school knowledge' is internalised by the child and can be used for his own purposes that it has been transformed into 'action knowledge'. An interactive, participatory approach to teaching and learning maximises the opportunities for developing 'action knowledge' and allows for developing responsibility and autonomy, i.e., the involvement of the pupils in their own learning. Throughout this process '…each increment [of learning] must be accommodated to what the learner already knows by various processes of adjustment and revision' (Little, 1991: 15). Being aware of what pupils do, or do not, bring with them to the learning process allows for the differentiation of programmes that will make them more effective for individual learners and ensuring that intended outcomes are achieved.

The ability to critically appraise and reflect on both the content and development of his or her learning is a requirement of autonomous learning (Government of Ireland 1999; Ćatibušić and Little: 2014). These skills, in turn, lead to the ability to evaluate and modify progress where necessary. so that the learner can 'be certain that he has really acquired something [and] so that he can plan his subsequent learning' (Holec, 1979: 21). It goes without saying that if teachers are to be able to support developing autonomy on the part of their pupils, they must be autonomous learners themselves.

We know from research into the advantages accruing from bilingualism that having access to literacy in more than one language is cognitively beneficial (Bialystok, 2001). Additional language acquisition is supported where pupils have well-developed skills, in particular literacy, in their home language (Swain *et al.* 1990). Therefore, it is important that parents are encouraged to support their children's developing proficiency in the language of the home so that the benefits derived from this may be utilised to help learning of further languages.

Learning Outcomes and other Curriculum Components

While it is important that targeted competences or learning outcomes are clearly identified prior to introduction of a learning module, the range of pupil competences, their differing learning rates and abilities and the unique linguistic repertoire brought by individuals to the learning process must also be taken into consideration. In addition, teachers must be equipped with an understanding of the crucial role played by language in learning (Bullock, 1975: 338). Including language-awareness components in the content of lessons can act as a link between additional languages and the language of schooling (Hawkins 1999). This applies not only to the communicative function of language but also as a vehicle for cognitive development. The notion of a defined 'learning pathway' rather than a prescriptive approach to teaching and learning languages has been proposed, so that individual learners can progress at their own rate and in accordance with their level of engagement with the language(s) in question (O'Duibhir and Cummins, 2012: 15). Level of engagement is, of course, a key determinant in pupils' success or otherwise in the learning process. Starting from what the learner brings to the learning process, including their personal linguistic repertoires, allows pupils to receive and express 'messages that are important to them' – key determinants for success in learning (Little, 1991: 42).

When responsibility for learning activities is shared between teacher and pupils, the result is often an increased capacity on the part of the pupils to be more actively involved in the learning process. Allowing pupils to be part of the evaluation process, understanding how it can aid their learning, makes evaluation a learning tool rather than simply a teacher-driven result-oriented process for the learner. The self-driven sportsperson, poet, musician or scientist will engage in repeated reflection, practice and honing of skills to achieve their desired result. Leni Dam points to the 'virtuous circle of learning' that involves awareness of how to learn. This, in turn, 'facilitates and influences WHAT is being learned and gives an improved insight into HOW to learn' (Dam, 1995: 2). The ELP has been designed to facilitate precisely this type of reflective learning that in turn supports the development of learner autonomy. After a module of work has been completed by checking the 'I can' statements, the pupil can ascertain where he has made progress and where he needs to concentrate further efforts. Asking questions such as those contained in the Biography section of the ELP,

viz., Where can I learn language? How do I like to learn language? What have I learned? What do I need to learn? encourages both reflective learning and teaching (IILT 2004). However, if such learning environments are to flourish, teachers need to maximise opportunities to develop the language learning skills of all pupils.

These reflective skills can be transferred to support all areas of learning in the primary curriculum. Such an approach can help pupils to think about:

- Where I can learn more about my locality – what do I know about Standing Stones? What do I want to know about them? Where can I find out more?
- How I like to learn – do I prefer to listen to an account of an event or to read about it?
- What I have learnt - I know how to do fractions
- What I need to learn – how to lift the sliotar off the ground with a hurley and then hit it.

Learning Outcomes and School Culture

It is a matter of personal observation, that where primary school pupils have been exposed to learning in a multilingual milieu, where all the languages of the school are valued, children begin to demonstrate metalinguistic knowledge in their increasing ability to make explicit their understanding of language, analysing and understanding its governing rules (see Kirwan 2013 for further discussion). Being encouraged to write dual language books helps learners' developing language and literacy proficiency (Figure 1). Parents or older siblings often help with the L1 written component thus providing interactive learning opportunities for the wider school community.
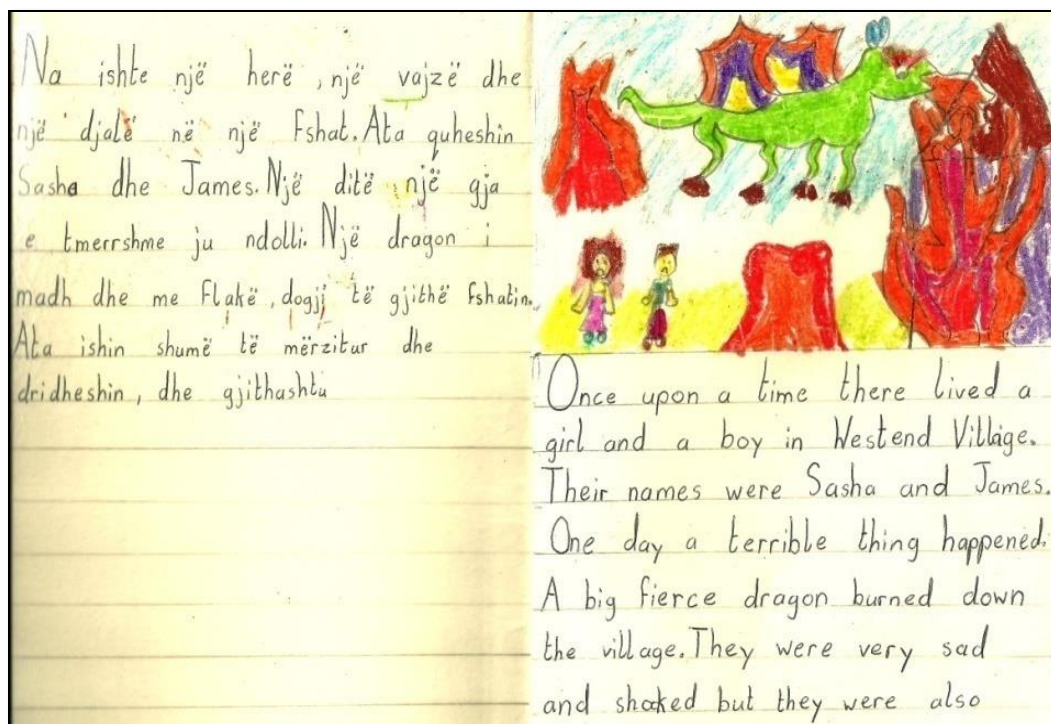
Figure 1 Example of a dual-language text written by a pupil in Third

Newcomer children who communicate in their home language, in addition to English and Irish which they are learning in school, can have a positive effect on increasing levels of motivation among their peers who are native-speakers of English and essentially monolingual. These latter pupils, wish to take part in the Plurilingual discourse of the classroom and in order to do so must employ and develop their Irish language skills. In Fifth Class, where French is introduced as a third language, pupils can choose their preferred language combinations that can change from one text to another (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Carte d'indentité written in Irish and French by a pupil in Fifth Class

Opportunities can arise for all kinds of linguistic combinations where an integrated approach to language learning is used. In Figure 3, a pupil chose to write a report on a visit to her prospective post-primary school using all the language skills at her disposal.

Cuairt ar an Meánscoil

Chuaigh mé agus mo chlann go dtí Pobal Scoil Mhín. Talagang yumao sa gabi. Nous avons vu beaucoup filles e garcons. Thosaigh an phríomhoide ag caint . The whole room started to quiet down. We were told that all the sixth class children were to make their way to the door. Ensuite, une fille a amenée nous dans une piece . Thosaigh said ag scoilt ar na páistí. Si Rainmay, si Petra ,at si Anais at ako nag paghati-hatiin sa isang grupo.We went into one of the English Classes and we did a Volcano Quiz . Une femme a demandé une question difficile et facile a propos de volcan sur le tableau . We also saw a bit of Romeo and Juliet . Four of my neighbours were part of the play.

Figure 3Multilingual text written in Irish, Tagalog, French and English by a Filipino pupil in Sixth Class

Pupils' written descriptions of models, following a Plurilingual class fashion show, complete with oral commentary, can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Texts in English, Irish, French and Mandarin written by a pupil in Sixth Class as part of a multilingual fashion show project
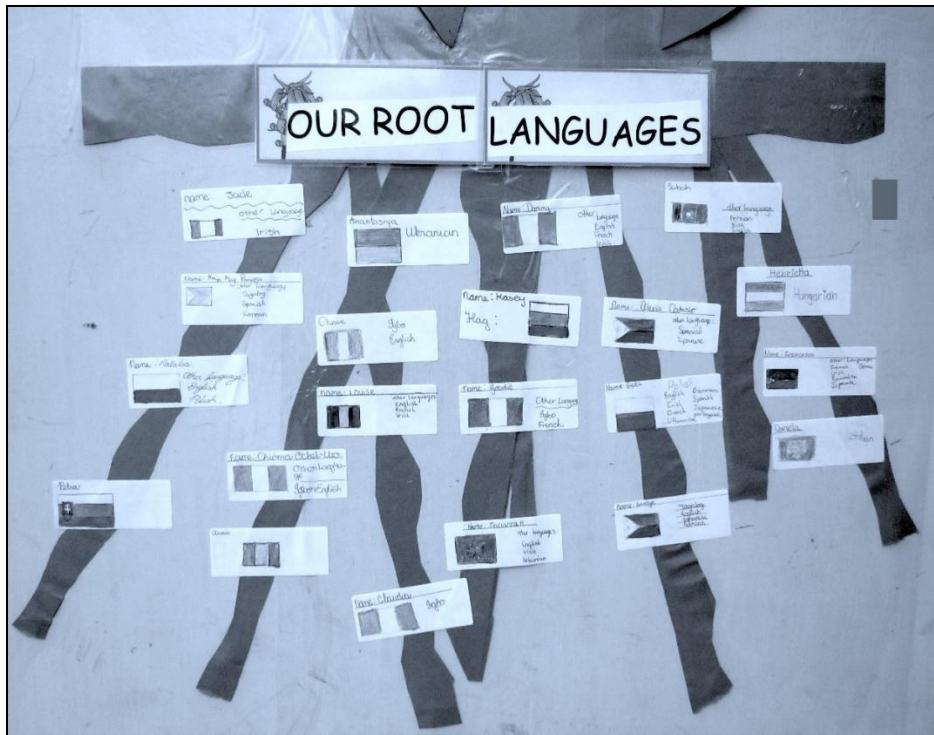
Figure 5 : Root languages representing home languages

For senior pupils at primary level, engaged in a process of self-evaluation to determine their levels of attainment in the skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, the notion of outcomes is helpful as it provides the motivation to test what has been learned, to identify gaps and where feasible, to move to the next level of skill. Developing such competence allows for the cultivation of learning milieu where children can begin to develop the skills needed for autonomous, lifelong learning. Concrete supports, to enable pupils to undertake self-assessment, can be very helpful in initiating this process, e.g., a 'Language Tree' with four branches representing the skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing can be used as the template on which pupils record their developing skills. Home languages are represented as the roots of the class language tree (Figure 5). Leaves, representing children's developing proficiency in the four skills are placed on the appropriate branches (Figure 6). As pupils' understanding and familiarity with the concept of self-evaluation increases, they can progress to a more formal representation of the outcomes of their learning.
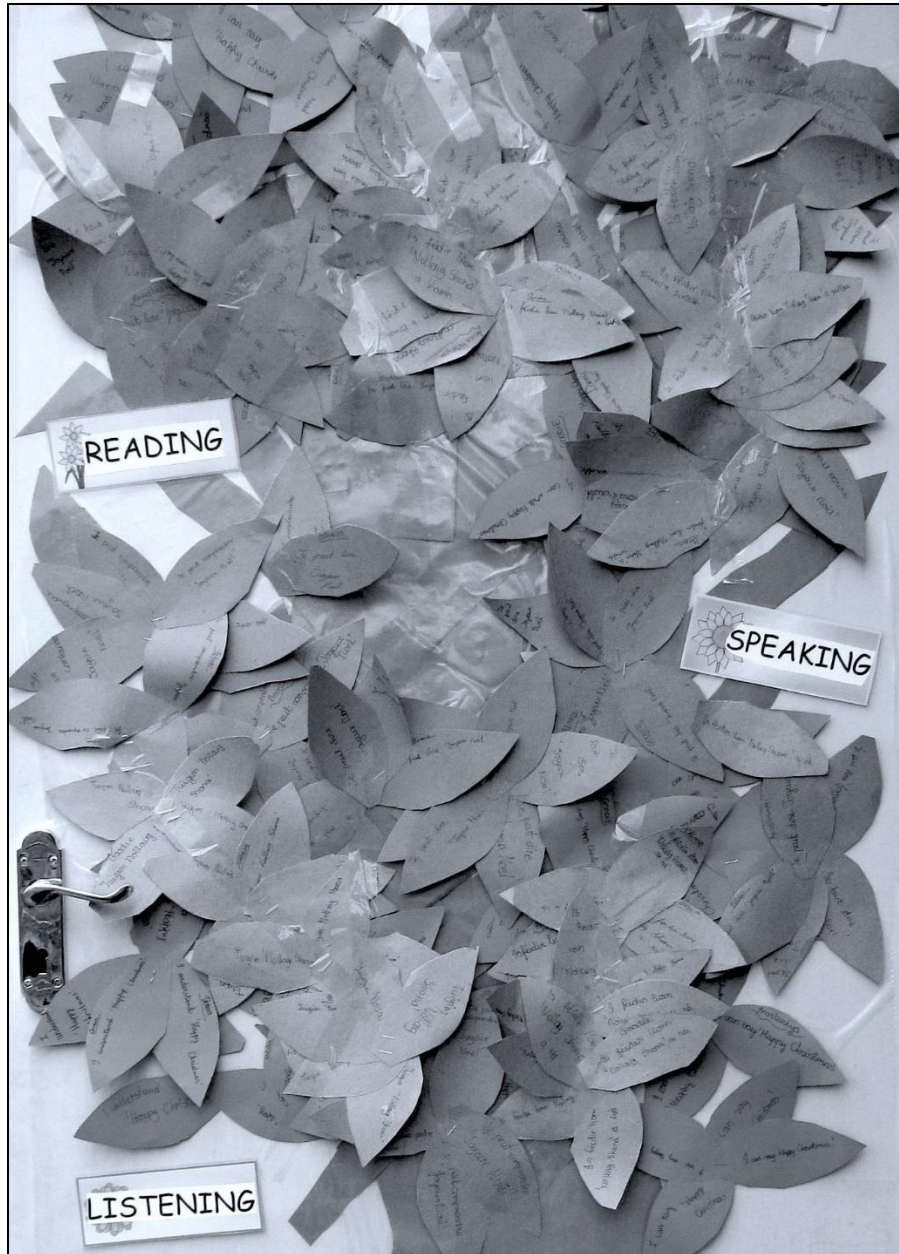
Figure 6 Our language tree

Alternative images

Figure 7 : Root languages representing home languages   *Figure 8 Our language tree*

Conclusion

It has been argued that the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* are a suitable tool for use in outcome-based language learning as their construction aligns curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to achieve the levels of language proficiency required in target language teaching and learning at primary level. Used in conjunction with the European Language Portfolio, they provide outcomes that facilitate autonomous learning that, in turn, equip pupils with the skills necessary for lifelong language learning.

As a proven and effective language-teaching tool available to the enthusiastic teacher, faced with the challenges of today's linguistically diverse classroom, an introduction to the *English*

Language Proficiency Benchmarks should form part of any teacher-training programme, and should equally be considered as a valuable component of courses in professional development for those already at the coalface of language teaching in Irish schools today. Where teachers are familiar with and understand the reasoning behind the notion of the CEFR and the Benchmarks, they will be in a better position to more judiciously support the developmental learning steps taken by their pupils.

Increased diversity in Irish classrooms provides the opportunity for developing plurilingual competences among *all* pupils both native speakers of English, Irish and diverse home languages. This, in turn, increases opportunities for developing language awareness among pupils, fostering many positive attitudes such as interest in further language learning, curiosity about, and understanding of, other cultures which in turn can contribute to the very important outcome of fostering social cohesion among the myriad groups and varied ethnicities found within Irish society today.

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