



Say Yes to Languages

promoting inclusion among pupils



Languages Connect bring you the second in a series of articles focusing on schools and teachers who have taken part in *Say Yes to Languages*, which is rolling out for a second year. Cathal Duffy, formerly a teacher and principal at St Peter the Apostle SNS, Dublin, talks about the journey to discovering Irish Sign Language and his experience of teaching the module.

Seven years ago, I joined a local gym where I live in Cabra. The area is known as the historical centre of the Irish Deaf community, largely thanks to the establishment of Deaf schools here in the mid-1800s.

More recently, a community and administrative centre with sports and social facilities was built as a hub for the Irish Deaf Community. Known as the 'Deaf Village,' it is also open to hearing people like me.

On my first visit, I observed that many members and staff were Deaf and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users. I watched as people communicated in full flow without words or sound, using their hands and body to express themselves; their exchanges augmented by animated facial expressions. "I have to learn this!" I thought, and signed up for an ISL beginners' class.

Seven years on and having retired from teaching, I recently completed a four-year fulltime Bachelors' Degree in Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin, and I am thrilled to be introducing ISL to primary school

pupils through the *Say Yes to Languages* programme.

Getting involved in *Say Yes to Languages*

Last year I heard about a new programme introducing primary school children to languages, including ISL. Having registered my interest, I was provided with online training with other ISL tutors, both hearing and Deaf, and familiarised myself with Languages Connect's curriculum guidelines and resources. Before long I was being asked by schools to teach the programme.

Recently I have taught the *Say Yes to Languages* ISL programme to several schools around Dublin - D7 Educate Together, Our Lady of Victories Boys and Girls schools, St Joseph's Boys Terenure, North Dublin Muslim National School, St Michael's House School Grosvenor, and currently, I am teaching the programme in Gaelscoil an Inbhir Mhóir in Arklow.

Pupils' experiences

Most children have never encountered ISL and find it a new and novel experience. One school I tutored in had Lámh, another signed manual form of communication, and it was a wonder to see pupils adapt to ISL.

In every school the reaction is always great. Children quickly take to communicating through a visual language, loving the freshness and newness of expressing themselves through their hands and body rather than through sound and speech.

Some children display a natural ability for certain school subjects that others may find challenging. The same is true for ISL. In every class there are a few students who show amazing talent for ISL, producing sign very easily.

It is interesting to observe children who are quite reticent initially becoming very engaged, animated and comfortable with the physicality of ISL as they progress. They prove themselves very skilled in

using facial expressions, hand shapes and various forms of body language.

One pupil, in a lovely note, thanked me for teaching him the “silent language” saying he was going to teach it to his aunt who had always wanted to learn.

On another occasion, I remember teaching a particular sign and inviting the children to guess what it might be. One pupil knew the sign already as apparently, one of the 6th class girls had taught them on yard. I was delighted. Turns out the children were out practising and sharing ISL at break time.

It is also lovely to see the teachers getting involved and being fascinated at learning this new language themselves.

Diversity and inclusion

The children are also aware of the multiplicity of other spoken languages and cultures in their families, classroom and the broader school and local community. This is a natural reflection of the diversity within our modern Irish society. However, there is usually less awareness of ISL and the *Say Yes to Languages* programme is a wonderful



opportunity to create awareness of, celebrate, and most of all, enjoy the language.

Moreover, it’s not just the language. The programme focusses on other aspects of Deafness and the Deaf community. It explores the challenges a Deaf person might face, e.g. interacting with hearing society, accessing education and services, appropriate ways to gain a Deaf person’s attention and so on.

When given the opportunity to think and talk about it, children show that they are very good at identifying the issues and challenges a Deaf person might face day to day. This is important for their overall social awareness and sensitivity. I also believe sign language is good for pupils’ general development. I know schools have really appreciated the opportunity to introduce ISL to their pupils, including St Michael’s Grosvenor School in Dublin, whose Principal Lynn Hennessy noted:

“We are a special school and were delighted to see we could apply for the Languages Connect grant to get an ISL tutor for our school. Most of our students are non-verbal, and communication difficulties can lead to frustrations in everyday life, the things you and I take for granted.

“Having a tutor who specialises in Irish Sign Language visit our school has helped the students learn in

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a fun and active way. We extended this further into the school by each student having a turn to teach the rest of the school the signs we worked on. The sense of pride in these students soared.

“We use our signs on an integration programme with a local mainstream school where we also teach them signs we use in everyday life. This is just the tip of the iceberg, we know it will take time, practice and knowledge for this to grow so we are excited to be accepted again this year from Languages Connect.”

The *Say Yes to Languages* programme is a fantastic development in the primary school system and it is my privilege and delight to be part of it.

2022/2023 programme

This school year, over 700 schools and 50,000 pupils nationwide are taking part in *Say Yes to Languages*. The programme, from Languages Connect, introduces pupils to a modern foreign language or Irish Sign Language, while also raising awareness among pupils of the diversity of languages being used by their peers in their schools and community. It is taught over an eight-week period during the normal school timetable.

CATHAL DUFFY is an Irish Sign Language tutor and former teacher and principal at St Peter the Apostle SNS, Dublin. For more information about Say Yes to Languages, email primary@ppli.ie or visit languagesconnect.ie.

Languages Connect promotes the personal, social, professional and economic benefits of foreign language skills to principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, parents and students.

Funded by the Department of Education and facilitated by Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), this is a key objective of *Languages Connect; Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026*.

Say Yes to Languages from Languages Connect offers an introduction into a variety of modern foreign languages and Irish Sign Language (ISL) while also looking to raise awareness among pupils of the diversity of languages being used by their peers in their schools and community.

