

A warm welcome with *Say Yes to Languages*

Languages Connect are delighted to bring you the fifth in a series of articles focusing on schools and teachers who have taken part in the primary language module, *Say Yes to Languages*, which is rolling out for a second year. Rosemary Lee, Deputy Principal of Scoil Niocláis, Frankfield, Cork highlights how the programme can offer the whole community a real chance to practice inclusion, and how language learning can support the acceptance of diversity.

Last school year, while putting together our application to become involved in *Say Yes to Languages*, input was sought from staff on which language we would choose. We debated whether we would choose a language that children might be likely to learn in the local post-primary schools, or whether we should choose a language that staff members have proficiency in which would allow them to be involved as a tutor.

We also looked at the languages of the children already in our school community as a starting point and eventually, we settled upon Spanish as it ticked



a number of the boxes we had been considering. However, roll on term two of the 2021/22 school year and the sudden arrival of children from Ukraine in our school community.

A passing comment from a staff member one day about how welcoming and inclusive it would be if their

classmates could say a few words to our new pupils in Ukrainian set us on a different path. Decision made – Ukrainian it would be!

A conversation ensued with Iryna, the grandmother of one of our new Ukrainian arrivals and a teacher with 40 years of experience in Ukraine. “Do I believe in

miracles? Can our thoughts materialise?” ponders Iryna, looking back on that time, when, newly arrived in Ireland, curious about the local education system, this opportunity presented itself and she grabbed it with both hands.

Infectious energy

“Iryna was a great teacher. We didn’t know Ukrainian words and she taught us lots of words. It was especially nice for Nikita and Sasha who are Ukrainian because they could understand what she was saying. I really want her to come back.” – This quote from one of our pupils sums up our experience with the *Say Yes to Languages* sampler module in our school.

Classes soon began and it immediately became apparent that we had discovered a gem! Iryna’s lessons were great fun, engaging and interactive, full of music, movement and energy.

Iryna travelled from class to class with a keyboard, puppets and a softball



tucked into her bag of tricks. Her passion and enthusiasm were infectious and the excitement was palpable as she launched into her lessons, captivating an audience eagerly waiting to take part in the call-and-response ball games or counting songs.

The eyes of the pupils lit up each week as Iryna greeted them from the door- 'dobrogo ranku', 'dobryi den' or 'pryvit!' and they sang back in unison. The pride on the faces of the Ukrainian children was immediately striking and a joy to watch, as witnessed by Mya who observed: "It made Tymur in our class feel happy when someone else spoke his language."

Languages support one another

The children loved learning a new language, playing games and being taught by someone who uses the target language all the time. Students in some classes who had Moldovan, Lithuanian, Polish or Russian backgrounds found several links between this new language and their own, while all children enjoyed discovering similarities and differences between certain vocabulary, phrases and sentence structures in the many languages spoken in our school.

Though the programme is generally organised as eight hours over eight weeks, due to our unique situation, we adapted it slightly, asking Iryna to visit all classes who had welcomed a new child from Ukraine.

Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) provided the support we needed to ensure the programme was a success in our school and was extremely efficient

and helpful to deal with.

Say Yes to Languages, provide a varied suite of resources, assist in finding and training tutors and have a user-friendly website which provides all the information and supports you need.

A box of goodies including notebooks, bunting, posters, pens and passports to support the programme and highlight our involvement among the whole community arrived shortly after we signed up.

Inclusion in action

The benefits of taking part in *Say Yes to Languages* are many. It is a great opportunity for children to hear and speak other languages. It provides opportunities for children to learn from each other. Our newcomer children felt valued and included.

Their parents were touched and grateful that we were encouraging Irish pupils to learn the language of their home country. Their children were very proud to be chosen to repeat and demonstrate in their new class, making it easier to build connections with their new classmates.

We also found it helped increase empathy for the newly arrived pupils in terms of the challenges they were facing in dealing with a new language with unfamiliar sounds, words and even a completely different alphabet. For our senior pupils, Iryna's classes certainly gave them a very positive flavour of what it might be like to learn another language at second level.

From strength to strength

We were thrilled to be accepted for a second time to take part in the programme. Iryna in the meantime, along with a Ukrainian colleague, had written a programme for teaching Ukrainian in our school using elements of Ukrainian dance movements, children's songs and folk games to add positivity, joy and fun to her lessons which she hoped would "encourage Irish children to learn the Ukrainian language for communication and to get to know the wonderful country of Ukraine."

"Iryna's visit to our class was always a special time in our week. The energy she brought with her stayed with us after she left and children continued to use Ukrainian greetings and words to each other throughout the week," recalled one of the teachers Ms O'Mahony.

We are indeed delighted that we said yes to languages!

ROSEMARY LEE, Deputy Principal in Scoil Niocláis, Frankfield, Cork. For more information about *Say Yes to Languages*, email primary@ppli.ie or visit www.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 PPLI, this is a key objective of *Languages Connect; Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026*.