



Collaboration connects dots of language learning

How *Say Yes to Languages* awakens fresh curiosity for languages among pupils

Languages Connect are delighted to bring you the sixth 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 third year.

John Meade, a teacher in Scoil Naomh Iosaf, Riverstown National School, Cork explains how *Say Yes to Languages* has helped the school open pupils' minds to various cultures, providing great examples of teacher collaboration, language curiosity and pupil involvement. He also discusses how he is considering taking the plunge into teaching the module this year!

Diversity as potential

Scoil Naomh Iosaf, Riverstown NS is a mixed primary school situated in Glanmire, in the eastern suburbs of Cork City. It is a large school, with just under 700 pupils attending. Glanmire is a fast-growing suburban area with a young and diverse demographic.

Within our school community, we're fortunate that a range of languages is spoken at home, and school. It was very exciting for the school to get involved with *Say Yes to Languages* when it became a possibility in 2021. We recognise that the

earlier pupils experience and experiment with languages outside of their first tongue, the more confident they will be in having a go at new languages.

Languages for social cohesion

In our first year, we took part in Italian tuition, and last year, we studied Spanish. Previously, we have run our own European languages initiatives, but with the current programme, it is great to have the structure, resources and support available from the Languages Connect team. The timing of *Say Yes to Languages* was opportune as over recent years, our school has taken part in the *Big Friendly Guide to the EU*, run in conjunction with University College Cork. We learned about the diversity of languages in the European Union (EU) and the need for competence in another European language to work in EU administration. A programme such as *Say Yes to Languages* reinforces many aspects of EU principles, like enhancing social cohesion and solidarity among EU countries.

Collaboration is key

Say Yes to Languages can be facilitated by class teachers or visiting tutors. In our

case, an external teacher ran weekly hour-long lessons. In both years, we were very lucky to have native-speaking Italian and Spanish teachers, Professoressa Patrizia and Maestra Mariana, the alliteration was purely coincidental.

When availing of external tutors, the success of this programme is based on positive collaboration between the visiting teacher and the classroom teacher. A school visit and planning meeting is key in setting things up. Very helpful classroom and student resources are provided, but it is open to teachers to structure classes as they prefer. During the first course, the children were fascinated to learn some of the geography and culture of Italy. How the Margherita pizza was invented in the 1880s when Queen Margherita of Savoy visited Naples; with basil, mozzarella and tomato chosen to match the Italian flag. The children had great fun enthusiastically practicing, as they learned the importance of hand gestures when speaking Italian.

The one-hour weekly lesson is core, but learning outcomes are better achieved if supplemented with a few minutes of daily revision: "Cleachtadh a dhéanann

máistreacht” a deireann siad, “La práctica hace al maestro”, “La pratica rende perfetti” ... practice makes perfect, or a little closer to perfect at least! For Spanish, Maestra Mariana gave us one very manageable weekly classroom task and one individual task. Some children were bitten by the language bug and on their initiative, worked through the levels of *Duolingo* in tandem with classroom work.

An increased curiosity for all languages, including Irish

During our second year, we were lucky to have two fluent Spanish-speaking students. Between Maestra Mariana’s weekly lessons, the two pupils, Maestra Andrea and Maestro Andrés, did check-ins with the classes. Using the word walls we built up during the eight weeks, they revised pronunciation and helped keep students and teachers on track. We all enjoyed having a new face at the top of the class, and hearing Spanish spoken without the Cork intonations!

Say Yes to Languages also opened the conversation by comparing words and sentence structures across various languages known to the students. Throughout the week, across the subjects, children far more frequently said, “That’s how you say it in ...” Polish, French or as Gaeilge. It awakened a curiosity for languages that will benefit them in all paths they pursue. Learning a new language reinforces why we learn certain elements of Gaeilge. Same or similar



principles apply across languages and children make incidental connections; their eyes are opened to the similarities as well as the differences between languages. It was fascinating to observe this transfer of skills across the languages.

The *Say Yes to Languages* programme also offers abundant opportunities for integration across the curriculum. Children completed short projects based



on the geography, food, art, tourism, and sports of the countries further deepening their sense of purpose in learning the language. It was lovely to learn rhymes and simple songs in Italian and Spanish, and to hear them sung on the yard!

I do not doubt that even after the relatively short eight-week programme, children will be far more confident engaging with a new language as part of their secondary school programme.

A personal reflection

On reflection about my experience, I can say to other classroom teachers that the opportunities and positive outcomes far outweigh the challenges we might encounter. A sense of excitement and curiosity towards this experience was palpable among the pupils. During our first year, we also received a visit from project leader Salvo Cacciato from Languages Connect: his passion and enthusiasm for encouraging children to have fun in learning a new language, swept the class right into the depths of the warm Italian Mediterranean, from our classroom in Riverstown, Glanmire.

Seeing the programme run in my classroom for the last two years, and having studied French as a Leaving Certificate subject, I’d like to think that with some upskilling, I’d enjoy

delivering the module myself in the classroom. This has become even more relevant since the March 2023 Department of Education announcement that in the coming years, children will be learning a modern foreign language as part of the redeveloped *Primary School Curriculum*.

The *Say Yes to Languages* programme has been an unmitigated success at Riverstown NS in Glanmire. It was embraced positively by teachers and students alike. When I saw the 2023/24 programme announced, I immediately applied, and we are delighted to have been accepted to take part again! We have once again changed our language choice and this year we will all learn some Français!

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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*.

