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Opportunities and Challenges in the Reform of Junior Cycle Language Curricula

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Introduction

The reform of language curricula at junior cycle (JC) in Ireland is situated within a wider set of reforms to the architecture of language and language educational policy in Ireland over the last ten years. Language learning curricula and policy have been subject to ongoing multi-strand reforms across primary, second and third levels. These reforms are being negotiated within the context of shifts in linguistic diversity nationally. These include the proliferation of languages other than English and Irish as home languages and the changing dynamics of the Irish language within/outwith the traditional Irish-speaking communities of the Gaeltacht. Within this environment, there is the potential for curriculum reform to more closely align language educational provisions with the linguistic needs of diverse learner cohorts.

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This chapter uses the lens of translanguaging (language as integrated and interdependent repertoires of linguistic competencies) to examine these multi-strand reforms, with a particular focus on junior cycle. The chapter first sets out the theoretical framework of integration, transfer and translanguaging and the sociolinguistic context for language learning in formal education in Ireland. The second half of the chapter interrogates the junior cycle specifications for English, Irish and modern foreign languages (MFLs) to determine their alignment with the key principles of an integrated approach to language. The analysis of junior cycle is set in the context of the language policy reforms over the last decade, particularly the development at primary school level of an explicitly integrated language curriculum. This chapter closes with a summary and recommendations for the development of language curricula in Ireland into the future.

Developments in Language Pedagogy: From Discrete Entities to Integrated Repertoires

Language curricula have historically operated a strict separation of named languages in education (García 2009; Littlewood 2014), encouraged maximum immersive exposure to the target language and have overtly discouraged the use of languages other than the target language in the classroom (Cummins 2017; Wei 2018). This approach emerges from the understanding that successful language learning requires extensive input in the target language, in a similar fashion to learning a home language (Leung and Valdés 2019), that is, implicitly and through immersion. This approach is also related to an inherent belief in languages as bounded entities that can and should be separated and distinguished from one another in all circumstances, including in education (García and Lin 2017; Wei and Ho 2018). At primary and second level education in Ireland, language curricula for English, Irish and MFLs have, until recently, been committed to the separation of named languages in curriculum design and especially in pedagogy. This approach has a strong

foundation in tradition and in the research literature. However, it is at odds with a plurilingual perspective on society and education, as advocated by the Council of Europe (CEFR 2018), with current understandings of linguistic proficiency (Cummins 2017) and with a social justice perspective on the experiences of multilingual learners, particularly migrant and minority language users (Poza 2017).

An alternative approach to language pedagogy has appeared in the literature from the end of the 1970s. Rather than seeing named languages as parallel and discrete entities, this approach recognises the interconnectedness of language proficiency and aims to leverage new linguistic competencies off learners' existing abilities in all of their languages. Cummins' (1981) Interdependence Hypothesis and the related Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model propose that although languages may appear quite different on the surface, there are many aspects of linguistic proficiency that are not specific to individual, named languages, but rather are common and interdependent across languages. Cummins (1981) thus argues that linguistic interrelatedness allows for transfer, specifically the transfer between languages of cognitive, academic and literacy-based proficiencies. Subsequent empirical work confirms that positive cross-lingual transfer can occur from one language to another in a range of sociolinguistic environments (Wei 2018). For this reason, it is argued that language curricula should aim to capitalise on cross-lingual transfer by specifically teaching for transfer in language education (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012). This can be achieved, for example, by drawing explicit attention to similarities and differences between features and structures of a new language and a student's existing linguistic repertoire. Although the idea of cross-linguistic transfer has been around for some time, it is only much more recently that it has been more widely and explicitly promoted as a pedagogical approach in the literature (Leung and Valdés 2019) and that it has been included as part of curriculum design (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012). The incorporation of transfer and interdependence into curriculum design is co-occurring with, and is related to, the burgeoning body of research on translanguaging.

Translanguaging has been defined in a number of different ways, with a consistent focus on the process of meaning making whereby

multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire as an integrated resource for communication, including home and additional languages. Following García and Lin (2017), there is a ‘weak’ version of translanguaging which accepts the boundaries between named languages but where it is seen as pedagogically advantageous to soften the boundaries between them in educational contexts and to explicitly focus on their interrelatedness (Leonet et al. 2017; Cenoz and Gorter 2017; Lewis et al. 2012). This perspective takes translanguaging as an academic scaffold in the language learning process. Adherents of the ‘strong’ form of translanguaging, on the other hand, contend that named languages are socio-political, sociocultural constructs (Wei 2018; Leung and Valdés 2019; Otheguy et al. 2015, 2019) and that the established boundaries between different named languages are artificial and arbitrary (Otheguy et al. 2015). Although recognising that students can and should be taught about named languages and their structures, researchers who subscribe to a so-called strong form of translanguaging also often advocate for providing instructional spaces in which seemingly hybrid language practices are celebrated and developed (García and Lin 2017; Otheguy et al. 2019). Such an approach recognises the validity and legitimacy of hybrid language practices and provides formal opportunities for students to mix elements from different linguistic systems, as in code-switching and code-mixing. This stance generally maintains a social justice and critical pedagogical approach in relation to language inequalities. Whether instrumental as in the weak version or critical as in the strong version, translanguaging pedagogy and research aligns with a plurilingual perspective as articulated in the Council of Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2018; Vallejo and Dooly 2020).

The research on translanguaging has mainly been investigated in bilingual educational contexts with more work now emerging in more traditional language-as-a-subject contexts (e.g. Wei and Ho 2018). The literature acknowledges gaps in the research in relation to the enactment of sustained translanguaging practices in schools (Llompарт et al. 2020), on the ‘tangible barriers’ (Vallejo and Dooly 2020, p. 9) to teachers adopting such practices and the profound changes required to transform assessment instruments (García and Li 2014). Furthermore, there are limitations discussed also in terms of the transformative potential (Jaspers

2018) or desirability (De Meulder et al. 2019) of translanguaging practices from a language inequality perspective.

Despite these limitations, the literature has demonstrated that there are significant benefits to adopting translanguaging practices in language education. Although named languages have generally been separated in formal education, research has illustrated that both students and teachers tend to blur the boundaries between languages in education. In bilingual educational contexts, students and teachers are shown to integrate their entire linguistic repertoire to aid content learning (García 2009; Ó Duibhir 2018). In the context of language-as-a-subject in mainstream education, research also illustrates that students (Wei and Ho 2018) and teachers (Littlewood and Yu 2011; Leung and Valdés 2019) draw on the language that they know already to scaffold their learning of the target language. Furthermore, as argued by Littlewood and Yu (2011, p. 71), the use of any language that students know already can:

- provide psychological reassurance for them
- convey meaning efficiently, allowing students to progress more quickly to internalisation and active use
- provide effective stimulus
- create contexts where the target language has a meaningful role
- provide a bridge to the target language, allowing students to take ownership over their learning and to personalise the learning experience

Recently, curricular reforms in Ireland have begun to incorporate aspects of transfer and translanguaging theory in their design. This is an acknowledgement of developments in the literature, but it is also taking place in the context of a new sociolinguistic reality in Ireland today.

Since the early 2000s, Ireland has seen significant increases in inward migration. In Census 2016, 17.3% of the population is reported as being born outside of Ireland (Central Statistics Office 2017). Two hundred different nationalities are recorded and over 612,000 individuals are returned as speaking a language other than Irish or English in the home (Central Statistics Office 2017). In total, 183 languages are recorded in Ireland, with notable numbers of individuals who speak Polish, French, Romanian and Lithuanian in the home (Central Statistics Office 2017).

At the same time, English remains the overwhelmingly dominant language in Ireland and Irish remains the national and first official language. While Irish is spoken on a daily basis outside the education system by just less than 74,000 people, the language also serves a symbolic, identity function for the majority of the population and has enjoyed consistent and significant support among the general public in language attitudinal research over the course of more than four decades (e.g. CILAR 1975; Darmody and Daly 2015; Ó Riagáin 1997, 2007). Despite noteworthy numbers of users of Irish outside the Gaeltacht who acquire Irish to high levels of proficiency, the language remains under pressure as a community language in the traditional areas of the Gaeltacht. This sociolinguistic context of increasing linguistic diversity nationally, alongside language shift in the Gaeltacht, forms an important background to the reform of junior cycle languages in recent years, as does the broader language policy context described in the next section. Language education policy and practice require an approach that acknowledges and values the realities of the multilingual context of life in Ireland today, both from a social justice and an educational outcomes perspective.

Language and Language Education Policy Context in Ireland

The reform of language curricula at junior cycle is part of the wider reform of junior cycle education in Ireland. In addition, the reform of the English, Irish and MFL curricula is situated within the context of a broader suite of language and language educational policy initiatives, as represented in Fig. 6.1. Until 2010, national curricula in Ireland had been relatively stable phenomena. The primary school curriculum had been running since 1999. The junior certificate syllabus had been established in 1989 and remained largely unchanged until the reform process of the early 2010s. Although the leaving certificate programme underwent changes in some curricular areas, the language syllabuses have remained largely unchanged since the late 1980s.

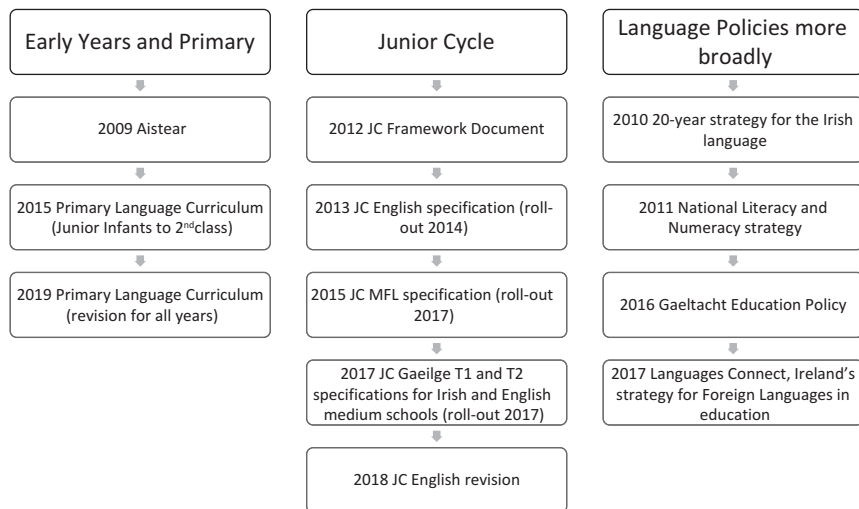


Fig. 6.1 Timeline of language curriculum and policy reforms (2009–2019)

The launch of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2011) provided a major catalyst to accelerate curriculum reform processes already underway. In addition to this, the 20-year strategy for the Irish language (Government of Ireland 2010), the Policy on Gaeltacht Education (DES 2016) and Languages Connect, Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education (DES 2017) framed the policy context for language curriculum change in the education system. While all four strategies are language-focused, each strategy delineates a very discrete and specific policy remit.

The 20-year strategy for Irish takes a holistic, cross-departmental perspective on supports for Irish across different branches of the state. It has implications for both educational policy and language policy more broadly. However, these are restricted to the Irish language. Similarly, the Policy on Gaeltacht Education focuses on provisions for the Irish language in the Gaeltacht, isolating Irish from English in that context and distinguishing Gaeltacht education from other areas of education in Ireland. The literacy and numeracy strategy is effectively a language strategy for the two languages of schooling in Ireland; English for English-medium schools and Irish for Irish-medium schools. The teaching and

learning of literacy skills in Irish as a second language is explicitly excluded from the literacy strategy as it states that this is addressed in the 20-year strategy for Irish. The literacy strategy launched at the height of austerity coincided with the abolition of the very successful Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative in 2012, that is, a reduction in language education provision at primary level to prioritise English language literacy. Languages Connect launched towards the end of the period of austerity and explicitly excludes Irish and English from its remit but includes other 'foreign' languages taught or spoken in Ireland including curricular languages in the education system and other languages used amongst the general population.

While the existence of a language strategy of any kind in Ireland has been long awaited, the fragmented policy approach in recent years goes against many developments in language education research, such as translanguaging theory, that argue for increased integration of languages. The policies thus do not address calls for an integrated approach to language education that have appeared in reviews of education policy in Ireland (Little 2003; Council of Europe 2008). This is despite the pedagogical and social justice advantages of such an approach described in the review of translanguaging theory above. As the next section illustrates, the balkanised policy approach at a national level is mirrored in the structure and outcome of the reform of junior cycle languages curricula.

Junior Cycle Reform and an Integrated View of Language

A focused analysis of the junior cycle framework document and subject specifications for English, for Irish in both Irish-medium and English-medium schools, and for MFLs was carried out for this chapter. The analysis reviewed the framework document key skills and statements of learning and the rationale, aims and progression statements for the specifications. A further in-depth interrogation was conducted of the specification learning outcomes as the main drivers of curriculum enactment through teacher planning and formal and informal assessment processes. The analysis of learning outcomes sought to:

- identify shared learning outcomes or parts of learning outcomes between the languages in second level education to evaluate opportunities for cross-linguistic transfer, and
- identify any explicit reference to, or any clear opportunity for, transfer and translanguaging in any of the curriculum documents to evaluate how and where transfer and/or translanguaging could be operationalised within a junior cycle context.

The findings indicate that while there exist ample opportunities for the explicit recognition and support for language transfer and translanguaging, this is not systematised across the various junior cycle language specifications. The call for an integrated approach to language education policy in Ireland pre-dates the Junior Cycle reforms (Council of Europe 2008). Furthermore, the development of the first language specification for junior cycle English was contemporaneous with the development of the primary language curriculum. The primary curriculum had a clear integrated perspective on languages, as evidenced by the referencing of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) primary language research syntheses in the English briefing papers and consultation documents. However, the topic of language integration and transfer which was central to the primary curriculum development process is not consistently prominent in the junior cycle language development process. This is evidenced in the artefacts of the development process: background papers, consultation reports and development group meeting minutes for English, Irish and MFLs. The artefacts of the development process for English demonstrate significant engagement with the issue of transition from the new primary curriculum and with monoglossic literacy but not with an integrated view of language proficiency. The Irish background paper acknowledges the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the plurilingual perspective on language learning but little more and the consultation report looks to emphasise the value of learning Irish over and above learning languages more generally. The MFL development process, on the other hand, perhaps reflecting the unified specification for all MFLs and the development group from multiple language stakeholder groups, does engage

with this topic and, as demonstrated below, this is realised in the curriculum specifications for MFLs.

As a result, the principle of integration across languages and the focus on students' full linguistic repertoires are not equally explicit across all language curricula or across all levels. All junior cycle language specifications reference the principle of integration across languages but crucially this is not represented in the specifications where they will be enacted, that is, in the learning outcomes. The present analysis revealed that this is particularly absent in English where there is only a passing mention of the importance of other languages in the rationale and nothing in the learning outcomes related to opportunities to engage with or leverage other language competencies. Given that the study of junior cycle English does not occur in a vacuum but parallel to the study of Irish and MFLs, and given that many students in Ireland today have diverse linguistic backgrounds, the negligible attention paid to integration across languages in the English specification is striking.

As regards cross-linguistic transfer, there are many opportunities for transfer in shared specification learning outcomes. The English specification and the Irish L1 specification, for Irish in Irish-medium school contexts, share a number of partial or complete learning outcomes across language skills, language awareness and learner strategies, as do the MFL specification and the specification for Irish as L2 in English-medium school contexts. Most of these shared learning outcomes are cross-linguistic skills that can potentially be leveraged across all languages. The examples below provide the code or numbering for specific learning outcomes in the relevant language specification documents. For example, there are a number of transfer opportunities for pragmatic aspects of language use: under writing, English and Irish as L1 have explicit learning outcomes in relation to the writing process (English Writing 1 and Irish 1.28) and Irish L2 and MFL share learning outcomes in relation to reading for gist (Irish 1.8 and MFL 1.6) and reading for detail (Irish 1.7 and MFL 1.7). The potential efficiencies for teachers and learners in leveraging these cross-linguistic skills are only explicitly and positively noted in the MFL specification under Strand 2 Language Awareness, in particular Learning Outcomes 2.2 and 2.6.

Both the Irish and MFL specifications include learning outcomes relating to metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic transfer. Crucially, however, these are framed very differently. The Irish specification emphasises negative transfer that may lead to errors and inaccuracies (Irish Learning Outcomes 2.3 and 2.5). In the MFL specification, a positive emphasis is placed on comparison and contrast to explore languages as systems (Learning Outcomes 2.4 and 2.5). The tendency in the Irish specifications (for both Irish-medium and English-medium schools) is to reference inward to the language community, native culture and the characteristics of Irish rather than outward to comparisons with other languages and cultures evident in the MFL specification. This purest, insular approach to Irish is perhaps best understood as a protectionist response to the minoritised status of the language. On the other hand, the Irish specification alone has explicit learning outcomes in relation to developing an understanding of multilingualism and acknowledges the centrality of language in relation to identity. The junior cycle language specifications, although acknowledging a shared understanding of languages and language learning, are positioned differently in relation to a linguistically diverse reality: English acknowledges the existence of other languages but no more; Irish aspires to a bilingual context but from a defensive standpoint; while MFL looks to leverage all language learning in the service of new linguistic competencies.

As regards translanguaging practices, there are many opportunities to incorporate these but none of the specification learning outcomes explicitly references them. Many of the learning outcomes discuss articulating responses to texts but there is no explicit mention for example of responding to texts in other languages. Similarly, there is explicit reference to students choosing their own reading material and extending their range of sources but no reference to leveraging opportunities to engage with materials in other languages also. Opportunities to broaden and deepen linguistic repertoires outside of the named language focus are not acknowledged within the language specifications. Even the language learner awareness aspects of the specifications are discrete and focused on the specific named language which raises the possibility of learners writing discrete language learner reflections for each language instead of

drawing together their learning from all languages, as is currently the case with the Classroom-Based Assessment 1 reflection templates.

The lack of explicit support or structure for cross-linguistic transfer and translanguaging is a missed opportunity in the junior cycle framework. Key skills offer cross-curricular alignment, but this is not leveraged for languages. The key skills of literacy and communication offer this possibility but do not express it overtly by acknowledging students' broad linguistic repertoires of integrated cross-linguistic skills. This is despite the fact that the literature suggests that it is more so at later stages of multilingualism that full benefits of transfer can occur (Cummins 1976). The discrete nature of subjects at second level in terms of specifications and personnel mitigates against an integrated approach to language, even though a translanguaging pedagogical approach does not require teacher language proficiency in all the classroom languages (Llompert et al. 2020). The potential efficiencies of teaching for transfer are not explicitly identified in curriculum documents, however. This is exacerbated by school structures where typically planning for teaching, learning and assessment happens within separate English, Irish and MFL departments. A truly programmatic approach at junior cycle which leverages the key skills across the curriculum and across languages would allow for efficiencies in teaching, learning and, particularly, in assessment. In view of the splintered approach to language policies nationally, the fractured nature of the reform of languages at junior cycle is somewhat unsurprising. They are part of the same established tendency in language policy in Ireland. Although there are many barriers to implementing a translanguaging approach at junior cycle, there is evidence from other areas of language educational policy in Ireland illustrating that it is possible to operationalise this model.

Language Curricular Reforms Across Sectors in Ireland (2009–2019)

As noted earlier, the curriculum reform at junior cycle is not occurring in a vacuum. It is situated in a somewhat fragmented language policy landscape but also in the context of significant change underway or in preparation at primary and senior cycle levels in Ireland. In relation to languages, the curriculum reforms outside of junior cycle of recent years include the introduction of (1) the Aistear Framework for play-based early years education (NCCA 2009); (2) the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA 2015), its implementation from junior infants to second class and its revision and expansion to include all years of primary education (NCCA 2019); and (3) a revision of MFLs at senior cycle which had been commenced but has been integrated into the full review of senior cycle at consultation phase.

Shared Understanding of Language Across the Curriculum

In terms of the theory and approaches underpinning junior cycle language specifications, the PLC and the Aistear framework, there is a shared understanding of language and a shared basis for change, as demonstrated by the NCCA-commissioned reports on language learning (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012; Shiel et al. 2012; Kennedy et al. 2012; Harris and Ó Duibhir 2011). Elements include:

- a common understanding of language competence comprised of reciprocal integrated skills—listening AND responding, reading AND writing
- a common commitment to learning through meaningful communication
- commitment to the key role of learner autonomy and learner metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness in language learning
- acknowledgement of language as a key element in identity formation

Across all curriculum documents, there is a shared acknowledgement of the relevance and importance of students' linguistic repertoires (including English, Irish, Irish Sign Languages, other curricular languages as well as students' home languages) and an acknowledgement of common processes across linguistic repertoires.

Integration Across Languages

It is within the early years and primary curriculum documents in particular that students' broad linguistic repertoires are explicitly the focus for development. In recognition of the linguistic diversity that exists in Ireland today, described above, both the Aistear framework and the PLC emphasise the importance of supporting the development of all home languages in formal education in the early years. This includes official languages (English, Irish and Irish Sign Language) as well as those that do not have official status in Ireland but that are nonetheless spoken in children's homes. This is an additive and integrated approach to bi/multilingual language development. Support for additional home languages stands alongside support for the development of proficiency in English and Irish as the official languages of schooling. Indeed, this is seen as a necessary step to allow children to become confident and competent language users. The approach aligns well with principles of cross-linguistic transfer and translanguaging pedagogy. Support for the development of children's proficiency in additional named languages does not detract from their progression in other languages (Cummins 1981). Learning Irish does not detract from the development of English language skills, for example, nor does support for other languages that may be spoken in the home inhibit the learning of English or Irish. Instead, when children receive adequate and appropriate support to develop all of their languages, the process becomes complimentary, allowing children to fully develop all of their multilingual repertoire.

The PLC (NCCA 2019) exemplifies principles of cross-linguistic transfer and translanguaging explicitly and systematically. It is designed for transfer between languages, in particular between the languages of schooling, drawing on Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012). Opportunities

for cross-linguistic transfer are explicitly denoted in the curriculum through hyperlinks associating related learning outcomes for English and Irish. The curriculum also includes learning outcomes that explicitly reference transfer across other languages, for example, students' home languages. For stages 1 and 2 (junior infants to second class), these are focused in the area of engagement and motivation, supporting children to value, enjoy and become aware of characteristics of English, Irish and other languages where appropriate. While other languages will not be explicitly taught and therefore do not have learning outcomes in relation to linguistic competencies, they are acknowledged and supported in the curriculum as an essential part of the language learning experience of the child.

For stages 3 and 4 (third to sixth class) learning outcomes within each strand of the curriculum explicitly denote translanguaging processes, for example where children can demonstrate understanding in response to texts in other languages and use language creatively across named languages. Furthermore, the PLC support documents begin with explicit support for teachers in multilingual classrooms and provide examples of translanguaging practices facilitated by teachers. The Aistear framework and the integrated PLC provide a theoretical framework and explicit support and structure for language transfer and translanguaging practices to be implemented across early years and primary education. As explored above, the junior cycle specifications acknowledge but do not consistently reference or leverage transfer opportunities. In addition to Aistear and the PLC, recent developments at senior cycle demonstrate explicit support for the multilingual repertoires of learners in our classrooms. The NCCA is in the process of developing curricular specifications for Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian, given the large population of heritage language users of these languages in Ireland. These new specifications offer an opportunity to prioritise an integrated view of language at post-primary.

Summary

This chapter has described how the reform of language curricula at junior cycle in Ireland has resulted in a disparate set of specifications for English, Irish and MFLs. This approach is out of step with the literature on trans-languaging pedagogy. It is set in the context of broader trends in language and language education policy that have not often taken a holistic view on linguistic development. As sketched above, the contemporary socio-linguistic context of Ireland is increasingly complex and dynamic. Clearly, the diverse ethnolinguistic background of the population and the different profiles of the languages that have a presence in education mean that a nuanced approach is required in the way that named languages are managed in educational policy. Nevertheless, the isolation of language groupings into policy silos, with scant regard for the integrated nature of linguistic multicompetence, risks impacting negatively on the educational experiences of an increasingly diverse population. The result may be that language education policies are sub-optimal and do not recognise the integrated nature of language abilities and, as a result, do not leverage the possible efficiencies of an integrated understanding of language. The explicitly delineated named language remit in policies and curricula can lead to fragmentation in policy enactment.

The new Aistear framework and particularly the PLC, however, demonstrate that an integrated approach is possible in language curriculum design in Ireland. The main recommendation from this chapter is that language and language educational policy at a national level ought to take place within a holistic framework that recognises the interconnectedness of linguistic proficiency across named languages. Junior cycle language specifications would benefit from more explicit alignment between the different language specifications and from adopting an integrated understanding of language development. This can be supported through (1) shared and cross-referenced learning outcomes across language subjects (as well as explicit alignment of learning outcomes for progression across sectors); (2) an extension of the language-related key skills definitions to include explicit reference to language repertoires; (3) explicit trans-languaging opportunities within language subjects to be referenced in

learning outcomes; and (4) consultation or integration across language curriculum development groups, including English, Irish and MFLs. Although the development and roll-out of a translanguaging approach depends largely on the pedagogical practices of teachers, a necessary first step towards a more integrated approach to language at junior cycle is the explicit articulation of translanguaging principles in subject specifications. Through embracing such an approach at junior cycle, continuity can be achieved from pre-primary, through primary and second level education in Ireland. In this way, language education at junior cycle can be brought into closer alignment with the language educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

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