

Anticipating, monitoring, and adapting quickly to change, enjoying the change, and looking forward to more change in the future are all things that Post-Primary Languages Ireland has become familiar with in the pandemic. Many of the changes have been positive and have accelerated progress towards realising the implementation of Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education. Challenges have led to exciting new opportunities and projects, a few of which are outlined in this article.

#ThinkLanguages

The pandemic restrictions have made it challenging for schools to deal with Transition Year (TY) and its activities. In 2020, travel to a Dublin venue was no longer possible, so Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) sold the idea of a combined online and local event. #ThinkLanguages provided a platform for communicating the *Languages Connect* message to all audiences, promoting the many cultural, social, personal, and career benefits of foreign language skills.

It was an opportunity to 'think global, act local', and students got to organise their own school-based language events as part of the bigger event. The schools invite local speakers, have TY-led heritage-languages workshops, international food tasting, student-led salsa classes, and arts and crafts workshops, to name just some activities.

Pre-recorded workshops and resources, as well as some live workshops, are also offered to schools. These culture-themed language workshops and activities are available throughout the day and beyond the event. The workshop facilitators have been filmed in their relevant environments and can therefore show students exactly what they are talking about, all the time making language learning engaging, relevant, and fun and showing the value of using a foreign language in a career. This all expands the opportunities to frame language learning in context; for example, French and Fashion was filmed in Paris and included an interview with a French fashion designer who works in haute couture.

The benefits of moving away from a Dublin event came as a surprise. For one thing, local events provide additional capacity, so more schools and more students can participate. In 2021, 150 schools will do so, bringing the number of participating TY students to 12,000 – a 400% increase on the last time a central venue provided the focus. TY

Continuing the Implementation of Languages Connect

Navigating unprecedented change and progress through the pandemic



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students who previously disappeared on a bus away from the school now become agents of change in this broadened awareness-raising activity, and the event and work involved are visible to everyone in the school community.

The value of collaboration, which is central to change, has been strengthened, as have the links forged between PPLI and the schools, TY students, and TY coordinators in providing support for the event. Through these strengthened connections and associated projects and dissemination, TY coordinators and teachers of foreign languages are facilitated in delivering important messaging and necessary changes that are so much part of the Languages Connect strategy.

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There is also a new realisation of the value of the online context for making connections, which in these uncertain times is more important than ever. It is possible to be responsive in addressing schools' needs and concerns in staging the event, by offering the opportunity to attend virtual information meetings and communities of practice for involved teachers – this would not be possible to provide face-to-face for teachers seeking to attend from every corner of the country. They are able to log in without leaving their homes and have all their questions addressed in a timely manner.

Students are finding out what languages are spoken in their schools, and many students and teachers are surprised to discover just how diverse their linguistic community is. Students who speak other languages are given a voice for the day, which adds to their wellbeing and gives them pride in their identity. Their languages are celebrated as a resource rather than seen as a hindrance, and this supports greater inclusion and appreciation of diversity.

Feedback from the 2020 event included the following:

We discovered the true diversity of languages spoken in our school community and were blown away by it! We got to highlight and celebrate languages across a week of events; we've never done that before.
(Borrisokane Community College)

The positive atmosphere around the entire school all week – a great buzz! It was really needed this year! (Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, Glanmire)

There was a such a fabulous atmosphere in the school, a great buzz. The principal was so impressed with the student leadership that she would like every department to run a similar event. The students enjoyed the opportunity to run an event – a great insight into event management as a career. They learned that there is a lot of preparation that goes on behind the scenes and how to adapt when things do not go exactly to plan. Thank you!! (Stepside Educate Together Secondary School)

Blended learning

PPLI is currently involved in a number of pilot projects for blended models of language teaching and learning. Their aim is to support students of the new curricular languages – Lithuanian, Mandarin Chinese, Polish, and Portuguese – in particular those who are in senior cycle and wish to sit their Leaving Certificate in one of these languages but do not have access to the courses in school; or where the number of students in any one school does not constitute a critical mass.

The pandemic has encouraged a new openness to alternative pathways for teaching and learning. Acceptance of change has been necessary, and the status quo has been broken down, accelerating the introduction of new modes of provision.

In the context of implementing Polish, a combination of online and face-to-face teaching has emerged as a pilot project in collaboration with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB). Together with H2 Learning, PPLI and CMETB introduced a taster blended-learning project in March 2021 for TY students wishing to study Polish for their Leaving Cert. The full course was implemented in September 2021. Seventeen students from five post-primary schools in CMETB are engaged in the first blended Leaving Cert course. Students receive 3 hours a week of combined online, face-to-face, and self-directed study periods. The teacher is employed by PPLI and receives the support of an eMentor designated by each participating school.

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The hope is that this mode of provision will become available to students in more schools, and that this would enable significant numbers of migrant Polish speakers to maintain literacy in their home language. It is seen as a community response to the Programme for Government to embrace diversity in Cavan and Monaghan ETB.

PPLI is also piloting Saturday blended-learning courses for Leaving Cert Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese. These pilot courses aim to develop an alternative blended model of provision for students who do not have access to the curriculum in schools. Two groups of fifth-year students have been selected across the country to participate in this two-year project. The course is being conducted mainly online, with some events taking place face-to-face at a central location. The technical aspects of online teaching and learning are facilitated by eSchool at H2 Learning using Microsoft Teams as the main platform.

All teachers participating in the blended learning pilot projects have received training tailored to their particular teaching and learning context. This includes training on different aspects of blended language classes related to teaching (e.g., planning and building blocks in a blended model), cognition (e.g., task-based learning, assessment and reflection in blended learning classes), and social wellbeing (e.g., facilitating discussion and student participation, communicating with school). Teachers are supported by teaching and learning experts in PPLI (education officers and associates), technological experts in cooperating partner organisations (e.g., H2

Learning and eSchool), and supporting staff in cooperating schools (e.g., eMentors).

These pilots will inform the future development of courses and modules as additional or alternative means of implementing language education at the post-primary level and beyond.

Teacher CPD and support

In a general sense, teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) needs and the support they require have also changed. But teachers who had never previously engaged in CPD looked for support as a result of the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) that they were faced with.

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At PPLI we determined to make online learning accessible, focusing on the benefits of the changes and providing the appropriate support. Some teachers, accustomed to more traditional methodologies, initially panicked or were overwhelmed by the new methodologies, and particularly by the additional time involved in planning classes. They needed reassurance that we would provide support and give them the guidance they needed to learn to adapt. We surveyed all our teachers about their fears, doubts, and uncertainties and then committed to addressing these. We quickly demonstrated that we were committed to organising CPD sessions and tutorials not just on the technologies but also on the new methodologies required.

Some went into denial and ignored the advice and support we were providing. On reflection, we could have shared the Kübler-Ross curve with our teachers as a way of encouraging them, because it would have normalised the challenges they were experiencing and reminded us all that the different reactions to the changes were normal.

As ERT continued, we encouraged the teachers to try new things as they began to explore using more of the new methodologies. We provided clinics that they could drop in to once a week to seek support and guidance where they needed it. These changes need time to embed. We tried not to make the teachers do too much at once; instead we asked them to try one new methodology at a time, and when they were comfortable with it to introduce another. We also provided mentoring through observation of classes and formative feedback. This gave the teachers direction as they learned to explore and accept the changes.

The pandemic has made some teachers embrace technology that would have appeared inaccessible to them before. Teachers have shown that they are responsive to change, and they reflect that they have benefited from a new understanding of how to increase student engagement in the face-to-face classroom; this has contributed greatly to their success in providing a quality experience in the new normal. They also reflect that they are sharing more good practice and providing more support for one another – all very positive outcomes from what has been a very challenging journey.