

Building Connections between the European Schools System and Ireland's Education System

The European Schools (ES) system had its platinum jubilee in October 2023, marking 70 years of educational provision for the children of EU officials since the first European School was established in Luxembourg in 1953. This followed Ireland's presidency of the ES and the opportunity to influence the rapidly evolving ES system. This article reflects on how the two educational systems complement each other in language learning, citizenship education, and reflective practice.

Background

The European Schools (ES) system comprises 13 traditional European Schools and 23 Accredited European Schools across the 27 European Union (EU) member states. During its presidency in 2022/23, Ireland was responsible for leading and progressing various developments in the system.

Almost 40,000 pupils are enrolled in the ES system: around 28,300 in the nursery/primary and secondary cycles in traditional European Schools, the rest in Accredited European Schools (AES).¹ Ireland has one accredited Centre for European Schooling in Dunshaughlin, County Meath, under the patronage of the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board. Up to 400 Irish nationals are enrolled in traditional European Schools, while around 64 are enrolled in the AES.

Ireland's engagement with the ES system is overseen and administered by the Department of Education's International Cooperation Unit from a policy and budgetary perspective. Ireland supports the ES system



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through the secondment of teachers to teaching and management positions. The Department's Inspectorate supports policy development and the quality assurance of leadership and classroom practice in the European Schools in collaboration with the other 26 EU member states.

The centrality of home languages for second- and third-language learning

In addition to providing mother-tongue tuition, European Schools are strongly committed to developing pupils' multilingual skills and providing foreign-language learning from an early age. In light of new curriculum specifications in development by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), it is worth considering how the approach to language teaching and learning in the ES might inform discussions on language learning in Ireland.

In the ES system, each pupil is enrolled in a specific language section. The dominant language of the child (usually but not always the mother tongue) is important when choosing the section. At primary level, pupils learn all subjects of the curriculum through the section's designated language, which is the pupils' first language (L1). In the first year of secondary school, students begin to learn a third language. From year 3 in secondary level, certain subjects, such as Geography and History, are studied through students' second language (L2).

Similar to the integrated Primary Language Curriculum in Ireland, the ES syllabus makes connections within and across languages to support the transfer of skills between languages. There is a shared recognition between the ES system and Ireland's education system that pupils use their first language to help them learn a second language.

The ES system provides access to learning in 24 languages. This is facilitated either through a dedicated national language section, where all pupils' learning is mainly through their national language, or through vehicular language sections (English, French, and German), where national-language instruction is provided separately. There is a greater range of languages and language competences in the vehicular language sections than in the dedicated national-language sections. In addition to the L1 and dominant language speakers of the language, the vehicular language sections also accommodate pupils for whom there is no national language section in their school.

The ES system views the range of languages as a unique opportunity to enhance pupils' awareness and appreciation of language as teaching is enacted through a multilingual lens. The concept of learning language through such a lens comes from the iceberg theory of language acquisition (Cummins, 1981). Similar to the peaks of two icebergs, languages appear different on the surface and have common underlying linguistic features in terms of how language

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learning occurs. Hence, pupils in ES classrooms are encouraged to note similarities across languages and to use their L1 to help them learn through other languages.

Teaching through a multilingual lens represents an interesting divergence between the ES system and Ireland's education system in the centrality of home languages for second- and third-language learning. In the language curriculum in Ireland, the focus is on *language awareness* and *cultivating positive attitudes* towards home languages – key contributors to second- and third-language learning. In ES anglophone classrooms, there is a stronger focus on actively exploiting home languages to enhance the learning of another language. As developments to incorporate Modern Foreign Languages in the primary school curriculum progress in Ireland, an opportunity exists to explore approaches to language learning and continue to consider what learning can be taken from the experience of the ES system.

The Centre for European Schooling in Dunshaughlin has begun the development of a 'Writing Fest' in the ES system across primary and secondary cycles, to engage pupils' multilingual repertoires to enrich their language learning.

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) dual-focused language-learning method is widely used in the ES, whereby the target language is used as the medium of instruction for learning and teaching both content and language. CLIL is also advocated in the Primary Language Curriculum in Ireland, whereby pupils being taught through English may be taught some subjects through Irish. Hence, there is potential for reciprocal learning between the ES system and Ireland's school system.

In addition to these dedicated contributions, the Centre for European Schooling in Dunshaughlin has begun the development of a 'Writing Fest' in the ES system across primary and secondary cycles, to engage pupils' multilingual repertoires to enrich their language learning. This initiative enables teachers and pupils across all 27 EU member states to use the enhanced digital learning skills they developed during the Covid-19 pandemic to write collaboratively in real time to maximise literacy engagement. Writing in 24 languages, pupils engaged in composing, constructing, designing, and illustrating texts for possible publication in Writing Fest e-booklets.

Citizenship education and reflective practice

The ES presidency offered Ireland an opportunity to support a range of developments already under way in the ES system and to implement new initiatives to impact positively on the system.

A pilot Citizenship Actions for All Programme (CAAP) for students in S5 (Secondary 5) and S6 (Secondary 6) was developed to give students additional opportunities to develop their active citizenship and civic competency skills. Students volunteer through acts of service and participation in activities in their local communities. The programme adopted a similar approach to the *Gaisce*

President's Award programme for young people. The CAAP initiative relied on the dedication of coordinators in participating schools and on the support of parents and local community organisations. It expanded connections, fostered links, and built understandings across language sections, which form the core of the ES system.

During its presidency, Ireland prioritised the need to support teachers' pedagogical practice in the ES system through a series of multilingual asynchronous webinars for teachers and school management on the theme of reflective practice. The webinars were created with support from University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Marino Institute of Education, Mary Immaculate College, and the central Office of the Secretary-General (OSG) for European Schools, and were modelled on the theories of Rolfe (1996), Brookfield (2017), and Timperley et al. (2014).

The enhanced online learning possibilities developed during the pandemic ensured the readiness of teachers to benefit from this initiative, encouraging them to reflect on students' learning experiences. This also helped raise the visibility of the ES system in Ireland.

Conclusion

Ireland's presidency of the European Schools system provided an opportunity to contribute to its pedagogical development, with students and teachers at the heart of these developments. The focus on reflective practice in the ES system coincided with the OSG's plans to prioritise teachers' learning through a new centralised digital platform.

The Italian presidency, succeeding Ireland's, will build on the concept of reflective practice as the foundation for a career development framework for teachers in the ES system. It is encouraging that the CAAP initiative will be teamed with the existing work placement programme for secondary students in the ES system. This will bolster numbers participating in voluntary acts of citizenship and foster lifelong learning attitudes and skills in students. The European Parliament's Culture and Education report (Gaušas et al., 2023) provides further insights into the opportunities and challenges facing the future development of the ES system.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Accredited European Schools are linked to the ES system by an accreditation agreement. These schools offer a European education that meets the pedagogical requirements laid down by the European Schools, but within the framework of the national school networks of member states.
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Lily and Ciara from Scoil Mhuire na Trócaire, Ardee, pictured at the Primary Climate Ambassador Awards