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Off-balance: the integration of physical education content learning and Irish language learning in English-medium primary schools in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Increased attention to integrated approaches has resulted from demands to prioritise literacy learning while maintaining a balanced curriculum in primary schools. Limited empirical evidence to support integrated approaches to teaching physical education (PE) exists. This study explored the integration of PE content learning and the learning of Irish as a second language with eight English-medium primary school classes (ages 8–10). Data sources included direct observation, teacher interviews and written reflections, alongside focus groups with children. Careful implementation to balance language and content learning is recommended to ensure the promise of complimentary learning emerges within the spirit of an integrated curriculum.

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Content and language integrated learning (CLIL); elementary/primary physical education; Irish language learning; subject integration; literacy

Since the mid-2000s improving literacy and numeracy skills has become a priority of education systems around the world. This primacy has been fuelled by evidence that literacy skills in most developed countries are lower than needed to meet the demands of modern society (Reardon, Valentino, and Shores 2012). This research took place in the midst of a national furore which followed a decrease in Ireland's position from 5th to 17th in literacy skills in the international OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey in the period 2006–2009 (OECD 2010). The PISA test examines the ability of 15-year-olds from around the world to extrapolate from what they have learned and apply that knowledge in unfamiliar settings, both inside and outside school. A literacy drive at national level in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills 2011) ensued, with improvement in literacy identified as an 'urgent national priority' (Department of Education and Skills 2011, 14). The increased emphasis on literacy was qualified by an assertion that prioritising literacy was 'not incompatible with a broad and balanced curriculum, nor should it lead to a narrowly focussed curriculum' (44). There is some evidence to suggest that literacy and numeracy may not need to be prioritised to the detriment of learning in other areas. For example, in Australian primary schools, a high physical education (PE) time allocation was found to be compatible with the demands of traditionally academic subjects (Dollman, Boshoff, and Dodd 2006). In reality, however, literacy and numeracy prioritisation has led to the marginalisation of other curricular areas driven by an understanding that time allocated to subjects such as PE detract from learning in more 'academic' core areas. Evidence of this trend in relation to PE includes a reduction in curriculum time allocation for PE in Europe (Hardman 2008) and internationally (Hardman and Marshall 2000). The erosion of time has resulted in a subject hierarchy with lesser curriculum status for such marginalised subjects. A growing interest in

integrated curriculum approaches has emerged as side-lined subjects scramble to demonstrate their contribution to literacy and numeracy learning agendas.

Integrated learning approaches (Fogarty 2009) are promoted as a solution to balance the demands of learning across the curriculum within the time available in primary schools. As well as complimenting a balanced curriculum, adoption of subject integration been demonstrated to provide a more accessible and connected learning experience for children (Fogarty and Stoehr 2008). Research on integrated learning indicates that children who learn in integrated ways perform better or no worse academically than children in non-integrated programmes (Drake and Reid 2010). It remains to be seen how integrated learning might be aligned with literacy imperatives. The Primary School Physical Education Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999a, 1999b) recommends that PE and other curricular areas be integrated. Publications for teachers such as 'PE COUNTS: A Guide to Reinforcing Numeracy through Physical Education' (Department of Education and Skills 2012) signal a trend, however, towards the promotion of literacy and numeracy learning in other curriculum areas without a reciprocal consideration of these subjects within literacy and numeracy time.

In Ireland, literacy encompasses both the English language which is the first language of the majority of the population and the Irish language which is a curriculum subject in schools. Poor mastery of the Irish language by children (Harris et al. 2006) has resulted in policy strongly recommending the integration of Irish language learning with other curricular areas (Harris and Ó Duibhir 2011). Furthermore, the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy advocated for the 'potential for developing children's literacy competencies in Irish through using the language to teach other subjects' (2011, 50). PE scholars suggest that there is significant potential for first language learning (Block 2001) and second language learning (Bell and Lorenzi 2004; Gomez and Jimenez-Silva 2012) in PE. There is, however, little empirical research on the experiences of teachers and the children when second language learning is promoted in PE (Kirk, MacDonald, and O' Sullivan 2006). Guidance and strategies to integrate language learning in PE classes generally appears in practitioner publications and recommendations are grounded in practitioner experience rather than empirical research (Block 2001; Clancy and Hruska 2005; Gomez and Jimenez-Silva 2012; Humphries, Bidner, and Edwards 2011). Benefits suggested include cross-curricular learning, open-mindedness and greater understanding of diversity and other cultures (Lieberman et al. 2010). Given the policy demands to engage in integration of curriculum, it is essential to develop an understanding of how to approach the integration of PE with literacy and numeracy learning, the challenges that arise and the implications for learning in PE.

Research informed guidance is available to support the integration of language and content learning (Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols 2008). Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is an umbrella term for approaches with a dual focus on curriculum content. The teacher is challenged to balance content mastery and second language learning within their pedagogical approaches (Met 1999). Content selections are informed by the specific learning needs of the children within the content area (Cammarata 2010). The target language becomes the vehicle to learn content at the same time as learning the language (Coyle, Hood, and Marsh 2010). The Irish language, while not a foreign language, meets the CLIL criteria as the language of instruction as it 'is one that students will mainly encounter in the classroom, given that it is not regularly used in the wider society they live in' (Dalton-Puffer 2011, 183). Adoption of a CLIL approach in primary schools can offer significant benefits for both language and content learning. CLIL researchers demonstrate consistently that children benefit from language learning in an authentic context (Cammarata 2010) resulting in increased language confidence and competence. The evidence is mixed on whether the content knowledge of children who learn using a CLIL approach is similar to or less than that of children who learn content in their first language (Dalton-Puffer 2008, 2011; Slyvén 2013). Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols (2008) suggest that the impact of a CLIL approach on content learning is recognised as counterintuitive – they suggest it is common sense that not as much content is learned. Notwithstanding this, and despite the compelling evidence of the benefits for language learning within a CLIL approach, it is

important to ensure that the content learning is not negatively affected or merely used as a vehicle for language learning.

In this study we explored the potential and pitfalls of using a CLIL approach to the integration of PE curriculum content and Irish language learning in primary schools. PE is generally a popular subject with primary school age children (Phillips and Silverman 2015) and so, this study began from a curiosity about whether Irish language learning would benefit from association with PE and what the implications for learning in PE might be. The research question guiding this study was: What are teachers' and children's experiences of an integrated CLIL approach to the teaching of PE and Irish in English-medium primary schools? Insight into their experiences can provide valuable empirical evidence of the impact of integrated learning approaches on both PE and language learning within the context of a prioritised literacy and numeracy agenda. Findings can also inform the design and implementation of future integration initiatives related to PE.

Methodology

Context

In primary schools in Ireland both PE and Irish are delivered by generalist classroom teachers. One hour of curriculum time each week is recommended for PE. The content of the PE curriculum includes the following strands: games, athletics, outdoor and adventure activities, aquatics, gymnastics and dance. Within each strand, learning objectives are identified related to skill learning as well as understanding and appreciation of physical activities. For example, in the games strand, the strand units for all class levels include 'sending, receiving travelling', 'creating and playing games' and 'understanding and appreciation of games'. Specific objectives for children aged 8–10 include to 'develop and practice a range of ball-handling skills' and to 'develop problem-solving and decision-making strategies, and an understanding of tactics and strategies for use in modified games situation' (Government of Ireland 1999a, 44). Integration possibilities are proposed in the PE curriculum document, for example the integration of the Irish language with traditional Irish games and dances. There is variability in the quantity and the quality of PE that children receive (Woods et al. 2010). This reflects the teaching of PE by generalist primary teachers internationally (Fletcher and Mandigo 2012; Griggs 2010; Ward and Griggs 2011).

The Irish language is a core curricular area within all English-medium primary schools in Ireland. A minimum of 3.5 hours of curriculum time is dedicated to the Irish language each week. The curriculum includes the following four strands: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Government of Ireland 1999c, 1999d). Strand units focus on language comprehension, language usage and language appreciation and are developed through theme-based instruction. Both the quantity and quality of Irish teaching in primary schools varies greatly (Department of Education and Science 2007; Department of Education and Skills 2013).

Participants

Five English-medium primary schools from the south of Ireland took part in this research across two academic years. Four of the schools were in the suburbs of a large city and one was in a small rural village. Over 200 children (Aged 8–11) from across the eight schools participated in the research. In year one, five primary classroom teachers (Sadhbh, Laoise, Triona, Maeve and Fran,) from three schools and the children in their classes participated. Three teachers (Dean, Liam and Nuala) and children from two further schools participated in year two. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the participants' identities. Most of the teachers had over five years of teaching experience with the exception of one teacher in year two who was in her first year of teaching. The teachers were all generalist teachers. Two of the teachers had an expertise in language teaching. None of the teachers had

additional expertise in PE. Ethical approval for the research was awarded by the University Research Ethics Committee and all participants signed informed consent.

Intervention

The teachers attended a two-hour professional development workshop which focused on preparing them to integrate language learning and learning associated with the games strand of the PE curriculum. The workshop involved an introduction to CLIL approaches followed by demonstration of and participation in a range of sample PE activities through the medium of the Irish language. The teachers were encouraged to identify learning outcomes related to both content and language learning in each activity. Each teacher was given a copy of the *Lámha in Airde* resource (O Muimhneacháin 2010) from which these games-based PE activities were selected. The games included relay activities, cooperative challenges and small-sided invasion and target games. Additional games resources drawn from the Buntús programme (Irish Sports Council 2003) which focused on fundamental skill developments were also provided in year two. Following the workshop each teacher delivered a unit of games-based PE (5–10 lessons) through the medium of the Irish language. In each lesson the children participated in games content through the medium of the Irish language. The content of the games as well as the instructions around learning and participating in these games shaped the language learning outcomes related to content-obligatory and content-compatible language. For example, a cooperative blindfolded activity required the children to give each other specific instructions using the Irish language such as ‘turn left’, ‘stop’ as well as more general encouragement ‘well done, you collected all the beanbags’. Support was available to teachers from the research team on e-mail. One teacher contacted the research team to seek advice on planning.

Data collection and analysis

A number of data sources were collected to capture individual experiences of teaching and participating in the intervention as well as their subsequent reflections on the experience. Prior to the intervention, a focus group (FG) exploring the teachers’ previous experiences of teaching PE and Irish was conducted at the introductory workshop. Teachers were asked about their motives for involvement and expectations in relation to potential challenges and benefits. After each teaching episode in the intervention, teachers completed a written reflection. Prompts focused on their planning and implementation experiences and the challenges they had encountered related to integrating language learning in PE. The following are some of the prompts used: ‘What challenges were presented to you as a teacher by the CLIL approach in today’s lesson?’ ‘Did the children experience any difficulties today during the lesson in relation to the CLIL approach?’ ‘Did you and the children enjoy the lesson?’ Members of the research team directly observed each teacher for one PE lesson towards the end of the games CLIL unit. In most cases in the lessons observed, the teachers decided to involve the children in playing a selection of games through the medium of Irish. The observer noted examples of language usage as well as evidence of successes and challenges in participating in each activity through Irish. At the end of the intervention an individual interview was conducted with each teacher. The interview aimed to capture their reflections on the overall experiences of integrating Irish language learning and PE content including benefits, challenges and recommendations for future implementation. Thirty-one children from across the eight schools participated in FG interviews including three–five students from each class group soon after the completion of the intervention. All the children reported liking PE. The FG interview focused on their experiences of the CLIL-based intervention and their perspectives on integrated PE and Irish language experiences. All voice recordings were transcribed verbatim and reflective diary entries were digitised.

All three researchers were involved in a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of these data. Firstly, all three researchers individually familiarised themselves with the data through reading and

re-reading and then completed an initial coding to identify recurring patterns and ideas within each data set. Categories in the children's data included 'more PE'; 'new Irish words'; 'out of classroom'. Coding of teachers' data resulted in categories including 'confidence'; 'vocabulary development'; 'more fun Irish', 'bringing Irish to life' and 'skill learning and challenge'. The researchers then met and shared their preliminary analyses. Through discussion and re-engagement with the data set, shared understandings were built and agreement was reached on candidate themes related to PE, such as 'participation in physical activity to learn Irish' and 'not as challenging PE'. Trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through triangulation across data sources to confirm patterns within the data set (Guba 1981). Refinement of each theme resulted in agreement on the central ideas within each theme. The two themes discussed in this paper relate to PE. Themes specific to Irish language learning strategies and experiences are presented elsewhere.

Findings

The following sections outline the teachers' and children's experiences of integrated Irish language and PE teaching within a CLIL approach and the implications for PE content learning. The two themes discussed are: Language learning was prioritised, and Language acted as a barrier to pedagogical strategies in PE. Quotes from participants are used to illustrate each theme. Where interviews were conducted in the Irish language the quotes were translated directly into English.

Theme 1: language learning was prioritised over PE learning

Overall, the integration of PE and Irish was positively received by all participants. Both the teachers and the children acknowledged how PE provided an attractive context for Irish language learning: 'we got extra PE and all we had to do was speak in Irish' (FG, Liam's class) and 'when they're active they are more willing to get involved, they are more responsive to learning' (Liam). Physical demonstration of how to perform activities such as 'find a partner' or 'collect one bean bag at a time' were modelled by the teacher to help address gaps in language understanding. Teachers also received instant feedback on the children's language understanding through observation of them completing assigned tasks: 'It was clear if they understood or not. Either they ran to the red cone or they did not, they bounced the ball or they did not, it was very easy to see' (Sadhbh). Irish language learning and attitudes towards learning the Irish language benefited greatly from a positive association with PE; being active, outside of the usual classroom format, and using the Irish language in an applied setting: 'it was like being in the classroom doing the Irish, except we were outside getting fit while using the Irish, so we were learning and exercising at the same time' (FG, Sadhbh's class).

While all the teachers provided fun physical activity-based games experiences for the children the potential of complimentary learning in PE alongside Irish language learning was impacted by a limited understanding of PE curriculum and learning goals in PE. Dean's comment below illustrates how the teachers understood the integrated approach as participation in physical activities without an explicit PE learning focus:

it's a win win situation. The children will do more PE. The children will ask for more PE. They are more likely to be better behaved in other classes, to get more PE. They will try out more Irish in [PE] lessons ... It's a complete win- win situation. I mean it's very hard not to recommend an extra PE lesson with children enjoying themselves, asking questions in Irish and everybody's involved. (Dean)

The teachers approach aligned with the children's understanding of the intervention as physical activity-based as suggested above by a student in Sadhbh's class. Laoise explains: 'it was the fact of them being active and fit ... and they were exhausted coming back to the classroom ... it tired them out'. It seems the intervention was presented by the teachers to the children as an 'outdoor Irish lesson' and the children understood the intervention as involving physical activity-based Irish

language lessons. Both teachers and children identified skill learning opportunities, such as throwing and catching a ball, through participation in the games activities. Observation of lessons by the research team did not provide evidence of an explicit developmentally appropriate skill and understanding focus. Consideration of aspects of PE learning related to appreciation and understanding of activities were mostly absent. Participants did acknowledge the team-building and cooperation focus of some of the games: 'Nearly all the games were like team-effort games so you had to ... everyone has to put in some' (FG, Maeve's class). Again, this learning was largely facilitated through participation rather than through a directed approach to maximise potential PE-related learning. Some positive outcomes for PE curriculum delivery did emerge. The resources provided gave some teachers new PE content ideas: 'I got new ideas for the PE lesson which was a big bonus ... we enjoyed the PE class more' (Triona). Others were pushed to teach curriculum strands they would not normally teach: 'we did actually have a much broader PE curriculum' (Liam). The children did learn how to participate in some new games activities but PE learning was incidental through participation rather than intentionally planned and supported through developmentally appropriate activities.

Overall, both teachers and children acknowledged there was a marked difference between Irish language learning and PE learning during the intervention. The teachers prioritised language learning from the outset. Throughout the intervention teachers taught more Irish and the children learned more Irish. PE learning received less attention from the teacher resulting in fewer benefits for PE learning than for language learning. PE learning was anticipated as a by-product of participation rather than a primary learning focus for each lesson. This theme illustrates how the quantity of attention to PE was less than that given to Irish language learning. PE was employed primarily as a vehicle for Irish language learning rather than being given equal priority as promoted in a CLIL approach. In the next theme we illustrate how as well as lesser attention to PE learning compared to Irish language learning, the children's PE learning was further restricted by the quality of pedagogy employed.

Theme 2: language acted as a barrier to pedagogical strategies in PE

Implementing pedagogies to support the teaching of developmentally appropriate PE content through Irish proved a significant challenge for the teachers. Starting out, the teachers selected games activities for each PE lesson based on the language demands of the game rather than on the potential PE-related learning. Less challenging activities were also, in general, easier to explain; this resulted in the content of the lesson being dominated by activities that were simple to explain through the medium of Irish, regardless of skill demands. The teachers acknowledged that the skill demand of some of the games played in the first few lessons was too easy for the children though the language demands of these games was appropriate. One teacher intentionally selected content activities already familiar to the children rather than introducing new content activities: 'I thought it would be easier not to be teaching Irish and a game at the same time' (Nuala). While it may be argued that this was a sound pragmatic and pedagogical decision by the teacher, her choice impacted on the learning experience of the children. Unsurprising, when asked if they had learned any skills the children in her class replied: 'No we just learned the words' (FG, Nuala's class). As a result the children who reported liking PE most and being competent in games often did not feel as challenged by PE activities undertaken: 'in Irish ... we do easier games' (FG, Fran's class). A mismatch of task requirements and skill level resulted in children not feeling challenged by the skill demands of the activities. They suggested that, as a result, they did not learn as much in PE during the intervention compared to their previous PE experiences. Lack of challenge was the most common criticism of the intervention from the children. Most teachers repeated the same games activities from lesson to lesson to provide language practice opportunities without consideration of adapting the skill challenge involved. As the weeks progressed, the teachers found introducing new games less demanding due to the children's growing language competency in the content-obligatory language needed to play the games and content-compatible language to

organise the PE lesson. Overall, language demands restricted the teacher's ability to effectively select and adapt the requirements of the games activities to provide an appropriate level of PE challenge for the children.

Pedagogical aspects of teaching PE such as the provision of teaching cues, feedback and assessment of learning were also limited by language demands. Language competencies resulted in teachers leaning heavily on visual demonstrations to explain tasks and restricted the inclusion of supporting verbal cues and explanations. Dean explains:

The only time I ran into trouble was when I tried to explain too much. That's when I ran into trouble, that's when I had to speak more than four or five sentences. When there was a big chunk of information, as with a lot of our classes, you had to slow things down a small bit. (Dean)

Another of the teachers also acknowledged her pedagogical approach to PE changed because she was teaching PE through a second language: 'in terms of skills I didn't do a lot of assessment to be honest ... it was purely being active more so than skills' (Laoise). The children also identified this difference between PE in Irish compared to previous experiences of PE in which 'there are more instructions, and there's more games' (FG, Fran's class). The provision of feedback was also limited by language competencies. The teachers were more focused on whether the children were participating in each game as intended, running to the correct location, throwing to the correct person, and paid less attention to quality of the skill execution or supporting skill learning for individual participants.

Language requirements also limited the extent to which the teachers supported PE learning for individual children within their class. A few of the children found the extra challenge of engaging in PE activities through a second language and learning PE and Irish at the same time more difficult, as one of Maeve's students indicated it 'kind of got a bit confusing'. These children received less support from the teacher related to their skill performance of activities due to the restriction of communicating in a second language. For example, one teacher identified that she did not differentiate tasks to support less-skilled children in the same way as previously:

I clearly identified children in some of the games who had weaker ball-handling skills but because my focus was on the Irish language I found it difficult to differentiate between the more skilled and less skilled children, such as children with dyspraxia. I wasn't able to emphasise both language and skill differentiation simultaneously. (Sadhbh)

Sadhbh's experience highlights how adopting a CLIL approach may have unintended negative consequences for less-skilled participants. Given that this was the teacher's first experience of a CLIL approach it is not surprising that they were challenged to balance language and content demands resulting in less teacher-pupil interaction. The children's interaction with their peers was also impacted:

At the start there was a lot of English. Then, after the third or fourth class they were very silent, nods of the head, monosyllabic answers, and they were not talking to each other much. I think they were thinking 'I am not allowed speak English, I am not sure how to say it in Irish so I will just say nothing'. (Triona)

As the children learned the content-obligatory language needed to play the games and the informal language needed to discuss their experiences, the level of interaction between them increased. The children shared examples when they supported their peers though these related primarily to reminding teammates of specific Irish language words and phrases rather than to PE-related aspects.

Language competencies impacted the selection of developmentally appropriate PE content. The implementation of pedagogical strategies to support PE learning, such as verbal explanations, differentiation of context and provision of feedback were all affected by the CLIL approach. In these ways, teacher support for learning in PE was compromised by integration of PE with second language learning.

Discussion and recommendations

A CLIL approach that combines Irish language learning and PE content learning holds great promise for language learning in primary schools (Drake and Reid 2010). The findings from this intervention also clearly highlight some challenges when adopting a CLIL approach that integrates PE content and second language learning. The benefits of integrating language learning with content areas that children love, such as PE, are considered below. Ways to address these challenges to ensure balanced cross-curricular learning outcomes emerge are discussed.

Our findings support those of other researcher who propose that PE may be particularly suited to providing an authentic environment for language learning (Clancy and Hruska 2005; Gomez and Jimenez-Silva 2012). Benefits included language learning and a more positive attitude to the Irish language. The practical nature of PE allowed language to be applied in ways that enhanced the development of content-obligatory language needed to play each game and informal language around games playing (Block 2001; Clancy and Hruska 2005). Learning Irish through physical activity increased enthusiasm for learning and using the language, highlighting the value of language learning in practical and applied contexts. The children were overwhelmingly supportive of the possibility of extra physical activity and time away from the classroom and desk-based learning. Even the children who did not feel challenged by the PE activities within the CLIL advocated strongly for the initiative in comparison to classroom-based Irish language learning.

Although the children were active and enjoyed the physical activity-based approach careful attention to implementation is needed to ensure that benefits result for content learning alongside language learning (Gomez and Jimenez-Silva 2012; Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols 2008). CLIL researchers (Cammarata 2010) emphasise that instructional time must be dedicated to content teaching. In this research, the balance between content learning of PE and Irish language learning outcomes was not achieved. Selection of developmentally appropriate PE content objectives did not receive equal priority from the teachers which resulted in limited PE learning during the intervention. The language competencies of the children restricted achievement of objectives related to tactical and problem-solving aspects of game play. Overall, language competencies shaped the planning process in ways that detracted from the quantity of attention to PE learning. In the context of the significant language benefits that resulted, the teachers were willing to compromise on the extent of PE learning; planning of sequential developmentally appropriate tasks was traded for incidental learning of fundamental motor and team skills through participation in a variety of games activities. It is recommended that appropriate PE content provide the starting point for future CLIL initiatives and that language objectives are identified from within suitable PE content. Guidance is needed to help teachers plan appropriate content that balances authenticity and language complexity (Cammarata 2010).

The quality of teaching and learning in PE was also impacted by language competencies. Content selections were restricted by the language requirements of each game resulting in the level of challenge of activities not matching the children's developmental levels. Children's Irish language competencies need to be sufficiently well developed to fully engage with PE content. Given that a more complicated and challenging PE activity will usually require a more linguistically rich and challenging repertoire, an approach that considers both first and second language usage, known as translanguaging (Lewis, Jones, and Baker 2012) may be appropriate to support dual learning. The CLIL approach acted as a barrier to the implementation of pedagogical strategies to support PE learning. We identified a tension between the language competencies of the children and the extent to which the teacher was able to explain tasks, differentiate tasks to provide extra challenge or additional support to individual children as needed and assess PE learning. Ways to differentiate learning, such as the communication of extension tasks, in a second language needs further investigation to help teachers overcome these challenges.

Greater attention to PE content learning in planning of CLIL approaches is needed. Teachers need to be equipped with specific CLIL strategies to teach both language and content in integrated ways.

Given the seeming inevitability of language demands determining the PE content that can be taught when starting out with CLIL approaches, we suggest two possible routes for the implementation of CLIL approaches in PE alongside foreign and second language learning. Firstly, attention to contextual support and the learning demands of PE are important if children are to maximise learning in both PE and Irish language. It is essential that children have sufficient language skills to enable content learning and easy communication. A short unit of practical engagement in familiar PE activities combined with context embedded Irish language instruction might be provided in addition to regular PE (i.e. with a primary focus on language learning where explicit PE learning outcomes are a lesser priority, but move beyond mere physical activity engagement). This developmental CLIL approach, which primarily focuses on the PE language register, could ensure that critical PE-related language awareness is developed both linguistically and socio-culturally to cope with the language demands of the PE curriculum. In this CLIL approach content is used as a resource for learning language. Secondly, integrated learning at the time designated for PE on the curriculum (as usually happens with CLIL initiatives (Dalton-Puffer 2011)) should only be pursued when language competencies are sufficient to ensure that achievement of appropriate PE learning objectives is not inhibited. Such an approach may be supported by additional scaffolding of language learning in the classroom prior to the integrated PE lesson. Professional development focused on both knowledge and pedagogies of CLIL approaches to support teachers to adopt a CLIL approach that integrates PE and second language learning is recommended. Support materials should include activities of varying levels of challenge using a similar language register to help teachers differentiate PE content for children. With more experience of CLIL planning and increased expertise in the implementation of CLIL strategies, it is possible that learning outcomes in both language and content may be more effectively juggled.

The length of the intervention was a limitation of this research in two ways. Firstly, children's positive attitudes to the intervention may have been influenced by the novelty of the intervention which may not have been sustained over a longer period. A longer intervention is recommended to investigate attitudes across time. Secondly, a longer intervention may have better allowed the children to develop a more extensive language vocabulary to support engagement in more complex games activities. On the other hand, a longer intervention may have exasperated some children's feelings related to a lack of challenge in the games activities selected. Despite these limitations, this research provides important insight on the experiences of teachers and children engaged in integrated language learning and PE content learning. Our findings suggest that links between PE and second language learning can provide enjoyable applied learning opportunities and merits further exploration to identify how teachers can balance language and PE content learning in activities with more complex language demands. The practical nature of PE activities helped to scaffold understanding for the participants operating in a second language. Further exploration is recommended to link second language learning and other practically based content areas of the primary school curriculum such as music (Humphries, Bidner, and Edwards 2011) and visual art.

Conclusion

Overall, framing language learning within the out-of-doors, fun, games-based PE environment in integrated ways resulted in many positive benefits for the participants (Fogarty and Stoehr 2008). PE learning was certainly restricted by participation through a second language. Caution is recommended on embracing integrated approaches, such as CLIL, to prop up PE time allocation within the current climate of literacy imperatives. Careful planning by teachers who have the knowledge and pedagogical skills to balance language and content learning may create the possibility of a balanced and complimentary approach to content and language learning within the true spirit of an integrated curriculum. A considered approach is recommended to avoid the risk that content areas, such as PE, become a secondary concern in the service of language learning.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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