

The role of bilingual practitioners

Adults play a key role in teaching and supporting young bilingual children's language development. In this section, we examine how practitioners who share a language with children in a setting can promote their bilingual language development.

The crucial importance of bilingual adults as the mediator of culture and language for children during their early education and schooling is highlighted in the interaction between Nazma and the bilingual teaching assistant, Mussarat, transcribed below. [Nazma](#) found the transition from home very difficult and she spoke in nursery only when Mussarat was present. This transcript is from her first term.

Nazma and Mussarat, a bilingual teaching assistant	
1	Mussarat: <i>What's this?</i>
	Nazma: <i>Apples</i>
	Mussarat: <i>What's this?</i>
	Nazma: <i>Pears</i>
5	Mussarat: <i>What's this?</i>
	Nazma: <i>Lemon, yuk I don't like that</i> [making a face]
	Mussarat: <i>Don't you like it because it's sour?</i>
	Nazma: <i>Yes</i>
	Mussarat and Nazma: <i>1,2,3 green apples</i>
10	[counting together]
	Mussarat and Nazma: <i>1,2,3,4 pears</i> [counting together]
	Nazma: <i>We eat them, we like them,</i> <i>We get them, we go to a shop and we buy apples and pears...</i>
15	<i>We went to the shops with mum and Hasnan</i> <i>And we bought lollies</i> <i>We had Hasnan's birthday</i> <i>We went in a big mosque and there were lots of people</i> [the 'mosque' was in fact a hall]
20	<i>Friends and everybody was there.</i> <i>There was cake</i> <i>I went with Hasnan to the shops.</i>

(Drury, 2007, p.77)

We are given clear insights here into the role of Nazma's mother tongue. For Nazma, Pahari had been the basis for the greater part of her cognitive and linguistic development to date. There was little opportunity for assistance with her acquisition of English by peers for whom English was their mother tongue (Hirshler, 1994). Without Pahari, and the opportunity to use it with a mediator, Nazma would be isolated in a context where only English is spoken. Her mother tongue represents an ongoing bond between home and school, and thus an important continuity between the two domains. The tension for Nazma is to make the adjustment from home to school without losing the language and culture that sustain her. Nazma's ability to engage with Mussarat and to use her mother tongue for learning is evident here.

This conversation is embedded in Nazma's experience of family and culture and illustrates the importance for her of building on home experiences. Firstly, the opportunity to sit and look at a book with Mussarat gives her an appropriate context to relate a story from her home experience at some length. She talks about significant events in her life, knowing that Mussarat will understand. Secondly, Nazma knows that Mussarat will be able to interpret the meaning of her stories. Nazma knows the names of different fruits in her mother tongue and speaks clearly and fluently about them and about her family life. The crucial role of bilingual staff is highlighted here, as this is the only occasion when Nazma can communicate and begin to make sense of the strange world she has entered. Mussarat, as mediator, enables her to bridge the contexts of home and school and assists her to engage within the Zone of Proximal Development. In this way bilingual staff can play an important role in helping to mediate a continuity between the cultural and linguistic expectations of home and school.

The following strategies will support bilingual children's use of mother tongue in the nursery:

- Bilingual staff, or other bilingual adults, should spend time on a planned basis using mother tongue for routine classroom interactions and to support learning.
- Practitioners need to draw on bilingual children's home experiences and interests through home visits, involving bilingual parents in the early years setting and planning for activities and interactions which are culturally and linguistically familiar.

- All adults in the early years setting need to give a clear message about when and why mother tongue is being used and the use of mother tongue should be explicitly encouraged.

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