

## Language Development and Religious Education

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Language development is fundamental for becoming successful learners and confident individuals. The development of language is also significant for growing understanding and conceptual development in religion (Ashton, 2000). Religious education and the contribution it makes to children's social, cultural, moral and spiritual development in contemporary British classrooms is significant. It also makes an important contribution to pupils' skills in literacy and other key skills (QCA, 2004).

It is important for a teacher to have a basic knowledge about language acquisition and some understanding of [bilingualism](#) and the role that the first language plays in learning.

This guidance aims to present a set of suggestions specifically related to religious education in order to show its potential contribution to developing language among learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL). The suggestions will support future teachers and current teacher educators in using practical activities based on RE for this purpose.

### Background and Principles

When introducing teachers to areas of the curriculum where some children have specific needs or require additional assistance it is important that a distinction is made between children and their needs. Teachers should know that EAL is not a label (e.g. EAL children or pupils) and tutors should model the appropriate usage to avoid perpetuating its application as such. EAL is a term applied to make reference to the teaching of English as an additional language to those who speak other language/s but are learning English. Often the term bilingual or multilingual is also utilised to describe pupils for whom English is an additional language.

#### Task 1

Study the glossary definitions and terms related to learning English, what do you notice about them? What do they mean? What are the implications for you as a trainee / teacher? Why is it important to be clear about these differences?

##### Advanced bilingual learners

These pupils have already acquired conversational English and are now acquiring the higher-order language skills so essential to access the curriculum.

##### Bilingual

This terminology is used when a pupil has to use more than one language. However, it does not mean to say the pupil is equally competent in both languages. Bilingual describes the situation the pupil is in. It does not refer to a level of fluency.

### English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Pupils whose preferred language/s are not English learn English and add it to their other languages/s. This process is called learning EAL. At the same time, these pupils are learning the National Curriculum, which is taught in English. This is called learning through EAL.

### New to English

Describes a pupil (also called a beginner bilingual) who speaks no English as yet.

### Preferred language

The language a bilingual pupil feels the most comfortable with. This may be different for different tasks. It may not be the first language the pupil learnt. Many bilingual pupils are actually multilingual because they use more than two languages.

### Silent period

This is the time when a pupil new to English does not speak, but listens attentively. Some pupils have an extended silent period. This is normal developmental behaviour and should not be regarded as a sign of learning difficulties.

### Subject-specific vocabulary

Words which are only used or have a special meaning when used in a particular curriculum area. For example, 'crankshaft' is only used when talking about engines. 'Manifold' can have two meanings: one is subject specific to machinery, the other just means 'many'.

(Haslam, Wilkin and Kellet, 2005:97-98).

The second point to be noted is that pupils who learn English as an additional language have a range of cultural, educational, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, they are a heterogeneous group. Some may and others may not have special educational needs (SEN). This distinction is particularly significant. To provide maximum exposure for pupils learning EAL a whole school ethos which values diversity and respects cultures and traditions needs to permeate all teaching and learning and should not be confined to religious education lessons. Explicit usage of resources, based on a range of faiths, ensures that the topics and themes within religions are not treated in a tokenistic manner and marginalised as an area of learning. The whole curriculum ought to be used as a vehicle and reflect such content.

### **Task 2**

Using Hinduism as an example, choose a topic or theme from Hinduism which will help you to develop ideas to support and promote learning in each of the areas of learning below.

Understanding English, communication and languages,

Mathematical understanding

Scientific and technological understanding

Historical, geographical and social

Understanding physical development, health and well-being

Understanding the arts

Finally, it is of vital importance to the well-being of young children that their school experience is one which is not totally alien from their home background (Jolliffe and Jhingan, 1994:78). This concept has received considerable support from the recent government initiatives such as the *Every Child Matters* agenda where a holistic and multi agency approach is advocated so that every child (including those for whom English is an additional language) is healthy (emotionally and psychologically); safe (from verbal and physical abuse of all kinds); enjoys and achieves (as a learner) and makes a positive contribution (to the school and the classroom).

## **Religion and language**

Children's understanding of religious traditions and practices including social and cultural traditions is informed by their experiences and those offered to them by their teachers and the manner in which they are presented to them (Lindon, 1999:78-79). Hence it is important that these factors are taken account of when planning any RE work linked to language. Teachers should become aware of these experiences and deliver their work in appropriate and effective ways. A strong ethos of valuing the religious background of pupils for whom English is an additional language is important. Their religious and cultural identity should be celebrated by involving them in lessons; for example, through informing the class about a range of religious beliefs and practices. Teachers should also recognise that giving children the opportunity to sit, look and listen to sounds, vocabulary and gestures are all valuable learning experience for children. However, teachers also need to plan for children's active engagement and involvement. Assisting children to develop positive relationships with their peers is an aim of religious education. One of the main skills of 'working with others' involves pupils in learning to co-operate with others through collaboration both formally and informally (QCA, 2004). Talk partners and group work in religious education is an indispensable tool through which children get the opportunity to appreciate, query, and ponder over the views and experiences of others.

## **Essentials**

### *Self esteem*

All children need to develop their self esteem, self worth and self concept in a positive manner. It is important that learners experience their own worth and significance by realising that they are worthy of attention, acceptance and approval. Teachers have a responsibility to help build their self esteem by providing a classroom atmosphere wherein their sense of belonging and security is guaranteed. Teachers must have high expectations of children and young people including a commitment to ensuring that they can achieve their full educational potential and to establishing fair, respectful, trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with them and holding positive values and attitudes (TDA, 2007). There are some well established techniques to ensure this is achieved for all children. However, for children new to English, the following may be useful starting points linked to RE:

- Displaying a phrase, a map, a flag in the classroom before the child arrives or just after
- Learning as a whole class, greetings (see below: some greetings in various languages)
- Calling children by their preferred names
- Establishing routines quickly
- Offering verbal and non-verbal praise
- Offering encouragement
- Involving the child in errands with alternate peers
- Using gestures
- Smiling and being out in the play ground

The above points will develop a relationship of trust with learners and will demonstrate from teachers a concern and caring attitude for them. In such a learning atmosphere children can feel positive and good about themselves. In such conditions children feel safe, settled, valued and secure.

### *Who am I?*

There are many well known activities which could be used to raise self-awareness. In the class, teachers may use circle time to reinforce personal identity. Here is an example.

### **Task 3**

Identify the features, in the portrait below, which may contribute to raise self-esteem and self-awareness. How would you develop this further?



Image of self portrait by Fatimah

This activity incorporates the ideas of exploring multiple identities. The teacher discusses with the children questions of belonging and identity: who we are and where we belong. Having listed some examples, the children are then encouraged to create a self portrait to illustrate symbols of their faith, country or any thing special about them.

### *Learning environment*

Of utmost significance is the establishment of an effective learning environment which enables the child to feel comfortable and secure. A classroom must reflect various cultures and display identity markers taken from the diverse religions represented in the United Kingdom. These could manifest as wall displays, artefacts in a table corner or posters depicting words, symbols and special places.

It is equally important to ensure that pupils' confidence in their sense of personal identity is developed early. The physical nature of classrooms and the school will contribute partially to this. For example;

- learn some essential aspects of the linguistic, cultural and religious background of pupils
- make an effort to learn single phrases such as religious greetings and encourage the class to use different greetings over a week or so.
- explore the different ways people pray which will serve to highlight similarities as well as difference.

Religion	transliteration	meaning	text
Islam	As-sa-la-mu-alay-kum	Peace be on you	السلام عليكم
Judaism	Shalom	Hello/goodbye	שלום
Hinduism	Namaste	I bow to you	नमस्ते
Sikhism	Sat sri akal	God is true and timeless	ਸਤਿ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ,

Here again a tokenistic approach should be avoided. Instead of simply displaying greetings or a welcome chart on the door more work should be done. For example a teacher should use the terms often and children should explore their meaning, value system and significance.

### **Learning and teaching**

Lindon (1999:165-166) provides several suggestions for developing language and communication in early years practice which are supportive in some contexts where children are learning EAL. Children have opportunities to learn when they:

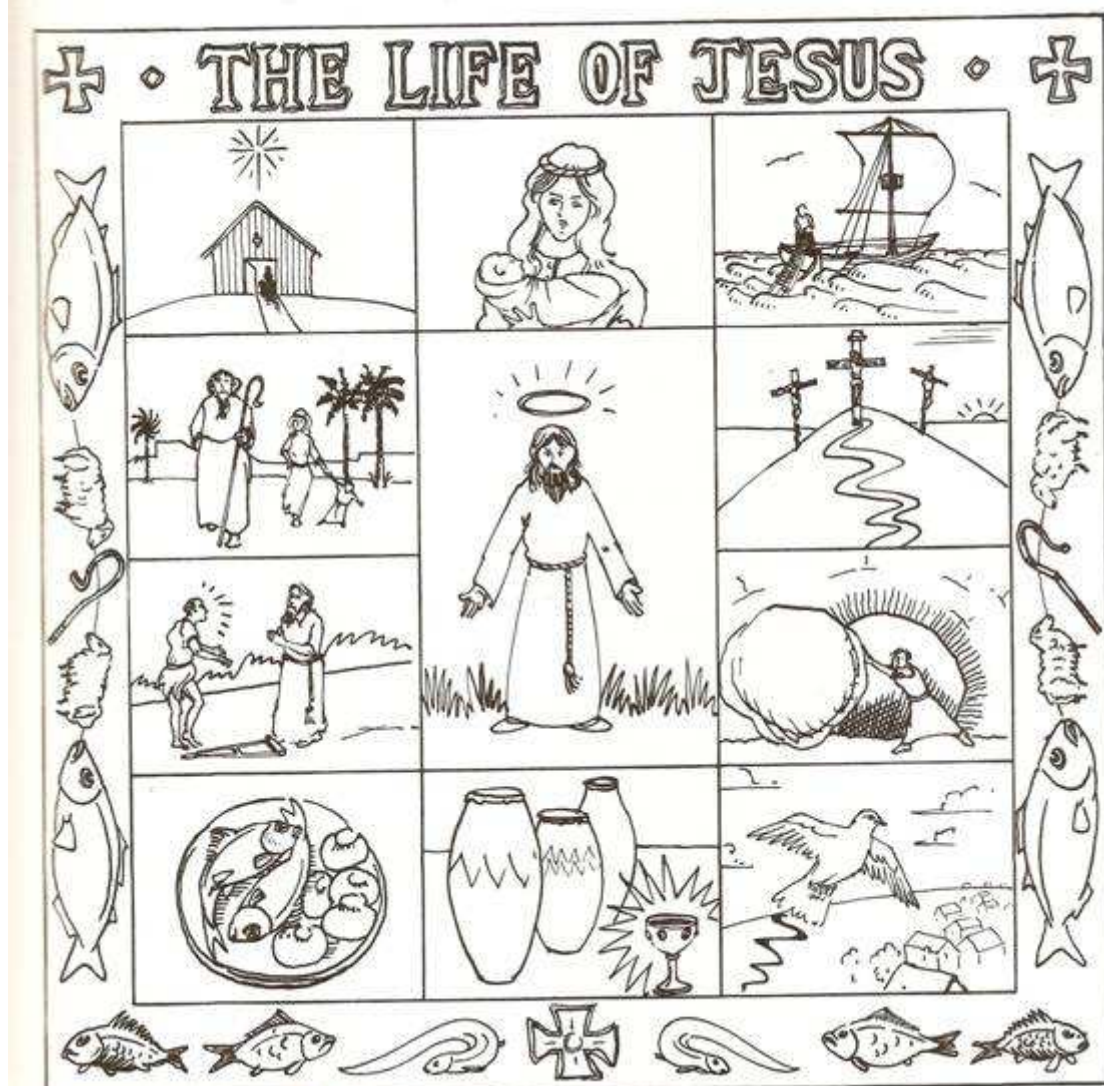
- Are given the chance to express their views, to share their views and to share information such as 'what we do in our home...' These exchanges may take place during circle time, in groups or with individuals.
- Listen to stories and comment on the characters and issues raised by important tales.
- Create and take part in simple dramatic reconstructions of some events or do puppet plays. They may present their work or a short drama to other children in their group, in school assembly or to parents in a special event.
- Make and illustrate their own books based on events and stories.
- Follow recipes for cooking special celebration foods.
- Improve their pencil control by drawing and colouring some of the complex designs or patterns associated with different religious traditions.
- Extend their reading and writing work through any of the projects. Children can also become aware that languages around the world have different alphabets and direction of handwriting. Some children in the group may already be aware of this because of their knowledge of literacy in their home languages.

**Task 4** As a group identify and discuss how the above ideas support language acquisition and what aspect of language is supported through them

## The essential language development tools

### 1. Stories

Stories are indispensable and must be used frequently because they enhance vocabulary of all kinds, assist interpretation, provide opportunities for raising questions and develop speaking and listening skills. In addition stories capture children's imagination and give them space for developing a spiritual sense. Appropriately chosen stories can be used to introduce moral or ethical dilemmas, empathy for characters and moments to reflect on the behaviour of the characters in the story. They should not only be read aloud or told, but also actively mimed, acted, repeated. They should incorporate gestures. There are several series available such as *I am a ... – My Belief* series by Lawton and Aggarwal (2001) and *Talking about My Faith* series (Senker, 2005). The Red Rainbows Religion collection published by Evans Brothers, which are also available as big books, is useful for first and non-readers. This series covers the six faiths with simple sentences from a child's perspective. Reading a story and illustrating it has some value but is insufficient for developing the full repertoire of literacy. Some children will enjoy and may be satisfied with such simplistic approaches. However, Cotton (1986:33) offers interesting methods related to religious education. The following example out of several others, some based on the stories Jesus told, have been found to be worthwhile for language development. These extend writing with each cartoon, giving understanding of structure and are open ended with potential for developing speaking and listening skills and writing skills developmentally.



Children's speaking and listening and confidence can also be developed and encouraged by inviting them to act out events of particular special days or festivals. This may require a

collaborative approach and some preparation before presenting it to the whole class at a basic level. For example, a Muslim child could be invited to demonstrate a typical day in Ramadhan. This child, who may be learning English as an additional language or be a fluent English speaker, would act out: getting up in the dark, eating suhoor, reading the dua, reciting the Qur'an, prayers and eating iftar. A plate full of food items that contained fruits and other edibles would be provided to encourage children to identify them and learn their names in English. The rest of the class would become familiar with the Arabic terms linked to the Agreed Syllabus.

Children are naturally curious to learn and discover. One of the many ways through which they do this is by asking questions. Questions can be modelled by teachers or peers and answers provided by other children. Questioning by children shows their thirst for knowledge and understanding. Stories provide many opportunities for using questions to develop a range of thinking, evaluative and analytical skills.

## *2. Songs and rhymes*

Gestures are a significant part of the teacher's repertoire and how these are used is crucial in enhancing how efficiently meanings are conveyed. The tone of voice, the choice of body language and gestures need to be used as effectively as possible. Poems afford opportunities for using gestures and visual support cards. Children are often keen and able to learn the words of songs or poems even though they may not understand what all the words mean. They enjoy adding actions or movements and this supports developing understanding of English.

### **Task 5**

Here are two poems/songs. Create an activity based on one of these to develop language. You will need to be specific about which aspects of literacy you want to develop. You should also identify potential challenges. What resources might you want the children to make?

#### *Ramadhan Moon lyrics by Yusuf Islam*

Moon, Moon, come out soon  
We're out to see the Ramadan Moon  
Clouds shift; fog lift! City put out your lights  
We want to see the Ramadan Moon – tonight!  
Now Ramadan has started; and the Moon has just been sighted  
Tomorrow we all fast – every Muslim must  
Now `Esha time is here; and it's time to leave for prayer  
The Imam is in the Mosque; the Qur'an is in his heart  
Moon, Moon, come out soon  
We're off to see the Ramadan Moon  
Clouds shift; fog lift! City put out your lights  
We want to see the Ramadan Moon – tonight!  
Moon, moon, moon,

[http://www.mountainoflight.co.uk/ramadan\\_moon\\_download.html](http://www.mountainoflight.co.uk/ramadan_moon_download.html)

*Guru Nanak's Birthday by John Foster*

Guru Nanak's birthday  
Today is very special.  
It's full moon day, today.  
We're going to the temple  
To worship and to pray.

We'll listen to the stories  
And share the festive food.  
Everyone's excited  
And in a happy mood.

Today is very special.  
Its full moon day, today.  
Today we're celebrating  
Guru Nanak's Birthday

(Court, 2006:88)

*3. Poetry*

Poetry has a significant place in many religions. The reading and writing of poetry exercises the imagination and helps articulate ideas and feelings which cannot easily be expressed in any other way (Mackley and Draycott, 2004:85). Many children will already be familiar with poetry and songs from their culture and can be invited to contribute these to the class repertoire. Poetry can be used to extend vocabulary, enhance spelling, letter formation, rhymes and other linguistic features. Some of them could be read and performed in pairs or groups to the class. An example is given below.

**Task 6**

Can you identify the type of poem used? Write a short one for yourself.

*Poem*

Peace is powerful  
Everyone wants it  
All will be happy  
Come and join me  
Everyone wants it.

*4. Life journey sketches*

It is likely that most newly arrived learners will still have memories of their journey to the UK. Others may have experiences of travelling back and forth to their country of origin for one reason or another. At the same time in religious education the subject of pilgrimage is very rich and common to most faiths. Herein are many opportunities for language development. Having discussed a pilgrimage, children for whom English is an additional language could draw a diagram showing their own life journey and write about it using technical vocabulary



provided by the teacher. Perhaps teachers could provide the stimulus by providing their own example to make it more real. Alternatively children could begin with illustrations of their journey and the teacher would ask the children to narrate their journey which could be tape recorded. The teacher could transcribe key words from these recordings and provide them as labels which the children would then stick to their diagrams. This activity stimulates much writing and discussion and sharing of ideas. An alternative resource to begin such a lesson would be Jyoti's Journey (Ganly, 1986). Teachers must note that for some children their journeys may have been traumatic and hence professional judgement should be exercised.

### *5. Cross curricular creativity*

Festivals and celebrations are a common feature of human behaviour and children should be encouraged to demonstrate, narrate, illustrate and discuss their features. It is a topic which can be utilised frequently and is very much enjoyed by most learners. Festivals by their nature are cross curricular topics and afford considerable opportunities for creativity although it requires a teacher to plan thoughtfully to make them so. Festivals enable children and parents to feel that it is perfectly acceptable to speak their language, wear clothes worn at home or clothes worn on special occasions and celebrate their religious festivals. Festivals need to incorporate the use of art, drama and music imaginatively to provide fun, engagement and interest to learners. As a creative teacher such teaching moves beyond the 'comfort zone' of colouring greeting cards and talking about food on festival days.

### *6. Drama*

Drama provides opportunities for rehearsal and practice as well as performance and for the use of a variety of forms of communication: both verbal and non-verbal including gestures and facial expressions. Drama will need the creation of a 'safe' atmosphere in order to build confidence. It should be introduced gradually. Most religions provide opportunities for the use of drama within their practices and rituals and in some religions there is dance, music, drama and plays. [Note: pupils should not be engaged in acts of worship, even in drama, other than that of their own].

Children often find making masks for drama fascinating and these can be used for many purposes. They are useful for engaging interest and retelling faith stories, for interpretation and visual expression of characteristics and for probing concepts such as good and evil (Mackley and Draycott, 2004:44).

#### **Task 7**

Think of a story from any religion. How could you use it as a drama? Design a mask for one character. Identify the language development opportunities it contains. Can you identify the type of poem used? Write a short one for yourself.

### *7. Active Learning*

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do I understand." This famous quote is attributed to Confucius. Action for understanding is apt in the context of English as an additional language. The idea that learners learn more readily by 'doing' is well known among

educators. Active learning rather than passive learning affords many benefits. A commonly reported advantage is that learners appear to enjoy learning more and are more motivated (Cole and Evans-Lowndes, 1994).

Cole and Evans-Lowndes (1994:66-67) provide a useful activity for identifying opportunities for active learning. In order to assist you in identifying areas for using active learning in religious education the following exercise is suggested from them. It might prove more beneficial if several people take part.

### Task 8

What do you understand by active learning? Identify its advantages. Individually make a list of all the possible active learning opportunities in all areas of the curriculum (e.g. simulations, discussions, problem solving, concept maps and interviews).

Compare your list with that of a colleague and compile a composite list. Consider in pairs or threes which techniques would be suitable for teaching religious education.

You will probably have decided that most active learning techniques are suitable for religious education. If any caused hesitation, spend a few moments considering why.

With colleagues suggest two or three religious themes which might be usefully explored through the active learning strategies you have listed. You will need half an hour or so to complete this task. You may like to use the following example list of active learning techniques to help you.

Example of active learning in religious education

Technique	Activity	Theme
Roleplay	Act out the rituals for the Jewish Friday evening meal to welcome Sabbath	Celebration

### 8. Multisensory approaches

A multisensory approach is important for all children but is especially important for children learning English as an additional language (McCreery, 2008:24). It adds meaning and context to the words, making it much easier to understand. Multisensory approaches make use of several senses simultaneously to transfer information to the brain when learning. For example, demonstrating a puja will offer children the opportunity to observe lightened candles, smell the incense, touch objects, hear the ringing of bells and chants being recited and taste food. All these are linked with developing children's language and understanding symbolism.

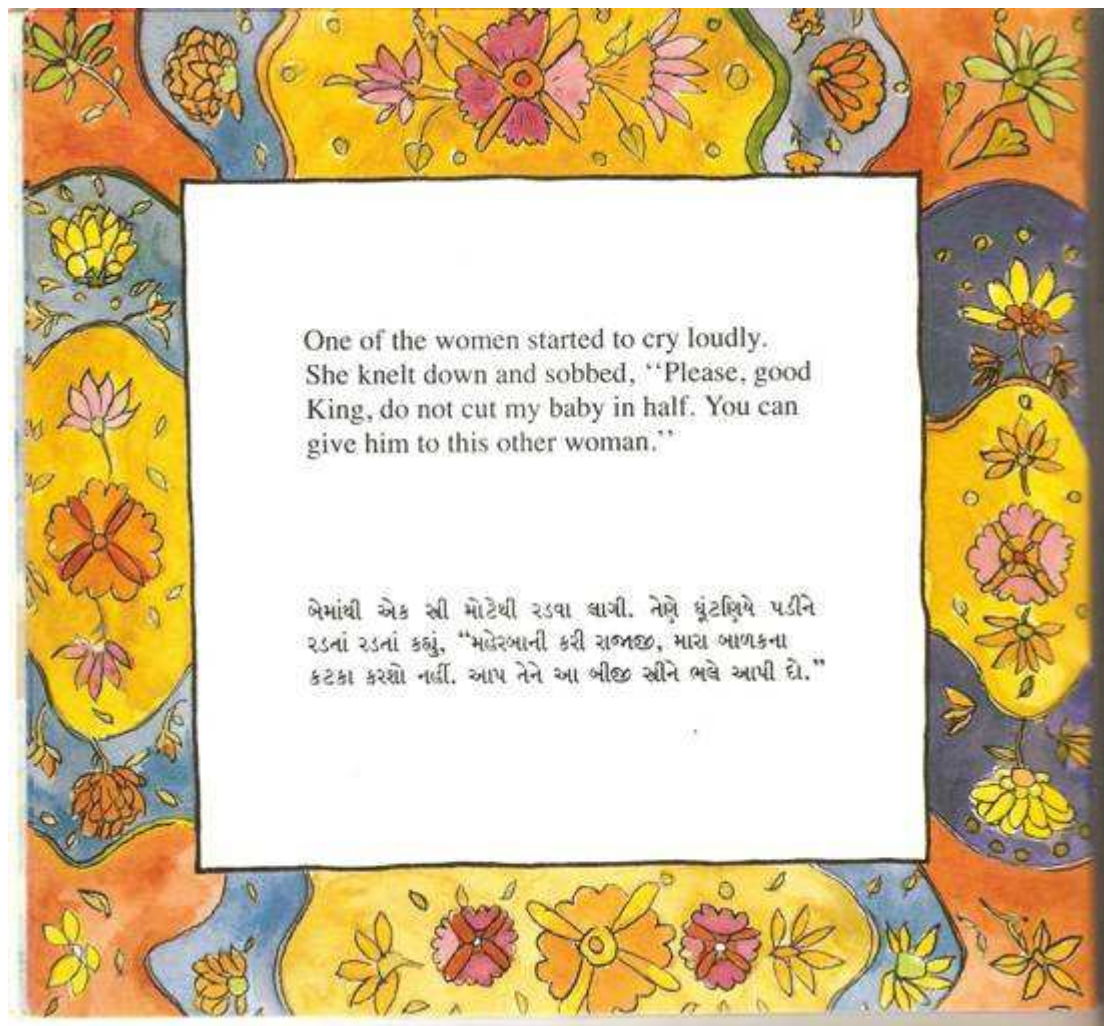
## Task 9

In six groups, discuss the advantages of multisensory learning. Create a list of items from one religion which would assist you in creating a multisensory approach in your class using that religion.

Share with everyone.

### 9. Dual text

It is advantageous to include a variety of picture books with text in the languages known to children in school. Although children may not necessarily read the text in the community language, for some it does demonstrate the value that the school attaches to linguistic diversity. Through this parents also know that the school values their children's first languages. Some parents may welcome this and read both languages at home. Dual text books can be used in religious education to great effect for a range of purposes. An example is *King Jahangir and the Baby* which has illustrations matching the Mughal setting and is available in several languages from Andre Deutsch (1988).



## *10. RE through ICT for language development*

### Digiblu

The Digital Blue camera has immense potential for language development. It allows children to create their own movies. It can capture every day events in a classroom or school and turn them into learning opportunities. It is ideal for children who are experiencing interactive technology on a daily basis. Being a portable device, children are offered the independence to plan, create and evaluate their speech, story, drama and performances of various kinds using this technology. There are many things that can be done using this software. Children can insert their own titles, credits, voiceovers, and add special effects and animations i.e., they are creating their own multimodal texts.

It is also a great tool for assessing the language development of children, especially for those who use English as an additional language. Any adult can record, to create a video diary, children's conversations at regular intervals, and later these can be used to assess, independently or with the children, the progress that they have made. This will increase their confidence and it can also be used to provide 'real' feedback to guardians and others.

### Photostory

Photostory is similar to Powerpoint but more 'child-friendly'. Teachers or children can easily insert texts, narrations, sounds and digital images all together. The end product is a slide show or a photo-movie. Children can experiment with using a range of vocabulary and develop their pronunciation and word recognition abilities. Photostory has huge potential when it is used to record a visit to a place of worship. The whole journey from the school to the place of worship and back can be converted into a story. Children: sequence the pictures, choose appropriate vocabulary, name the artefacts and other things observed, comment on what they saw, express their feelings, incorporate the talk given at the place of worship and evaluate their visit. Forward and effective planning will allow the use of Photostory imaginatively for any visit in religious education

Both these technologies have enormous potential in supporting the development of literacy and of confidence in communication skills.

### **Caution**

Several suggestions have been made above related to acting, drama, play and simulation of religious rituals and observances. Teachers need to exercise their professional judgement when teaching about these matters. Whilst one of the objectives of religious education is to allow children to empathise, know and to learn about and from other practices and thereby develop respect and tolerance towards these observances it is not the duty of a teacher to teach children how to worship. It is important to distinguish between giving children an understanding and respect for different religions and engaging them in acts of worship.

Teachers need to recognise that some children may well be advanced in certain areas of the curriculum especially in terms of their knowledge of their own culture, religion, history and geography and therefore they need to take account of this.

Further activities which develop the English language skills of pupils at different stages of learning EAL can be found at [EAL learning and teaching in Religious Education](#)

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## Essential reading

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- McCreery, E., Palmer, S., and Voiels, V. (2008) *Teaching Religious Education, Exeter: Learning Matters*. Chapter 4 is on Literature, literacy and RE, pp.38-55.

## Further reading

- Rutter, J. (2003) *Supporting Refugee Children in 21st Century Britain – a compendium of essential information, fully revised edition*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books. Particularly useful is Chapter 7 Supporting Children whose First Language is not English, pp.105-114.