

Strategies for early years practitioners

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Adults play a key role in teaching and supporting young bilingual children's language development. Some practitioners will be bilingual themselves and have a wealth of personal experience to draw on. Others may be very familiar with multilingual early years environments. Some may have had no contact with young bilingual learners. However all practitioners have a responsibility to support children in becoming and remaining bilingual and to be alert to the dangers of moving children towards becoming monolingual and using English only. Practitioners who do not share the language of some of the children in their setting may have difficulties in imagining how they will do this. In this article, we examine how such practitioners can promote children's bilingual language development.

With young children's development, there is at times a tendency to overlook their language development needs, simply because they seem to learn at a faster rate than, perhaps, older children. It is not rare to hear comments such as the following one expressed by a practitioner recently: *'She came to our nursery with no English, and now look at her! A year later and she is just like all the other children. Chats away nineteen to the dozen. Young children pick up languages so incredibly quickly. It's so easy for them. I wish I could do that in a year!'*

Whilst some young children do learn languages quickly, the view that because of this adults do not need to do much, is simply not correct. It is not true that younger learners will necessarily acquire an additional language more quickly than older learners. Their pronunciation may be more like that of a native speaker. A younger learner may also have less structurally complex language to acquire so may appear proficient more quickly. They may also get more practice and feedback and may more often be presented with language 'in context'. On the other hand, older learners may have advantages in being able to apply their more developed learning and thinking techniques to learning the new language. Student practitioners need to recognise that each learner is unique. Children are active participants in the process and they have very different kinds of needs depending on their stage of language development, and according to their individual and idiosyncratic personal characteristics and needs. For example, [Samia](#) demonstrated how she was keen to practise and rehearse English in the safety of her home whilst [Nazma](#) was still in the non-verbal or silent period and so not yet engaging with and using English in her setting. In all bilingual children's learning, the role of the practitioner is critical, as are the opportunities to hear and use home languages.

It should be emphasised that it is not just bilingual children who are at times overlooked in terms of their language development in early years settings. In their highly influential study, Tizard and Hughes (1984) fitted microphones to thirty 4-year old (monolingual) girls, and transcribed what they said both in their nursery school and at home with their mothers. Whereas the girls' talk at home was characterised by the use of questions and generally by richness and variety, their talk at school was noticeably poorer in terms of variety; typically teachers had no time to talk to their pupils, and at best they simply asked a long list of closed (and sometimes meaningless) questions.

'But I have 14 different languages in my setting!'

Many practitioners are daunted when they meet a number of different languages in their settings - of which they speak none - and have no established school-based support systems for dealing with this. There are many ways in which practitioners can begin to develop appropriate practices. One of the most effective ways is, of course, working together, cooperating and collaborating with bilingual practitioners including teaching assistants, and with parents, families and communities, but that does not absolve the practitioner from their own teaching responsibilities. Each child, irrespective of his/her home language - and irrespective of whether or not there are bilingual staff working in the setting - has a right to interact daily with the practitioner, a right to get to know the adults in the setting and to be known by adults.

Practical Strategies

The following list of practical strategies can be used by monolingual staff to promote bilingual language development:

- Play situations are an easy way of getting to know and interacting with children. Much of children's play is non-verbal and has a very physical element, such as poking tools in playdough, spreading glue, preparing cups of tea, and so. It is easy to join in and communicate by doing the same.
- In play situations practitioners can guide children non-verbally by demonstrating an alternative idea, approach or resource, to stimulate children's thinking further. This will ensure that thinking demands, or cognitive levels, remain high and that expectations are not lowered simply because the practitioner and the child do not share the same language.
- Practitioners need to model the use of English by providing a running commentary and by talking through everyone's actions and ideas.
- Practitioners need to build on all children's responses. They should interpret the very minimal non-verbal actions or gestures as proper turns in conversations, and use these to provide an English translation. One-word responses, or short phrases, are paraphrased and extended into longer sentences.
- Practitioners should provide opportunities for joining in choral responses, responding in turn-taking discussions which repeat patterns of language, and listening to the interactions of other children with the teacher.
- Practitioners should understand the [stage of English language development of bilingual learners](#) in the group and being sensitive to contexts which enable them to respond to or participate, and to contexts in which children can listen without having to respond.
- Planning for the consistent inclusion of bilingual children in small group activities which enable interaction with peers in activities which promote communication is important, particularly for children in the silent or non verbal period.
- The quality and timing of practitioner interaction that has the potential to make a real difference for all children. Within children's self-initiated play, the practitioner will remain close, listening and observing, and joining in as a play-partner as appropriate.
- There must be frequent and meaningful episodes of interaction with others. All activities, such as putting on a coat or having a piece of fruit, provide opportunities for conceptual development and they must be accompanied by the practitioners' use of language.
- General organisation, grouping children and fostering joint episodes of play between small groups or pairs of children, has the potential to create a purpose for peer interaction.

- The daily rituals and routines and related language are an important source of language for young bilingual children.
- Songs and rhymes, with plenty of repetition, are often learnt quickly and are a good source of language.

An extensive list of approaches and further strategies can be found in a 2004 NALDIC [conference presentation by Priscilla Clarke](#). Similarly, the Primary National Strategy guidance (2007) on bilingual children in the foundation stage contains useful practical strategies grouped under the following six headings: the role of the practitioner; grouping and organisation of learning opportunities; first hand experience and daily routines, games, music, stories and books. For example:

Music

Musical activities are particularly valuable for supporting language learning. Simple songs, rhymes and refrains chanted in a rhythmic way are often the vehicle for children's first attempts to articulate an additional language.

Sharing songs and rhymes in home languages reinforces similarities in patterns of languages and fosters home to setting links. Music is a wonderful medium for sharing cultures, languages and benefits, and enhances language learning. Parents and bilingual staff can help translate favourites such as 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' and 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' as well as sharing traditional rhymes and songs. These are also available via various websites, both LA and commercial.

Stories and books

Stories and books constitute a vital part of worldwide cultural and linguistic heritage. The well-planned use of stories, read and told, traditional and new, contributes greatly to children's understanding and developing use of language. (PNS, 2007, p 17)

Practitioners who do not share a language with some of the children in their setting will find much to help them in these and similar publications.

The role of bilingual practitioners

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

Mussarat: What's this?

Nazma: Apples

Mussarat: What's this?

Nazma: Pears

Mussarat: What's this?

Nazma: Lemon, yuk I don't like that [making a face]

Mussarat: Don't you like it because it's sour?

Nazma: Yes

Mussarat and Nazma: 1,2,3 green apples [counting together]

Mussarat and Nazma: 1,2,3,4 pears [counting together]

Nazma: We eat them, we like them, We get them, we go to a shop and we buy apples and pears... We went to the shops with mum and Hasnan And we bought lollies

We had Hasnan's birthday
We went in a big mosque and there were lots of people [the 'mosque' was in fact a hall]
Friends and everybody was there.
There was cake
I went with Hasnan to the shops.

(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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