

Luisa

Contributed by Jeannie MacMeekin

Luisa was born in Colombia and started school there aged 5, but came to London quite soon after this. She had not established secure literacy skills in her first language. Her parents speak some English, but have poor literacy skills in English. They lack confidence in supporting her schoolwork. Her grandmother often stays with the family for extended periods and is very keen for Luisa to succeed. However, they were all hostile to the idea of supporting her Spanish literacy skills, assuring the school that she never spoke Spanish at home, and would have no need to read or write it, as she lives in London now. Luisa herself is reluctant to talk much about her home life, finding it embarrassing when the class looked at Christmas family customs, and refusing to speak in front of the whole class about what her own family traditions are, although other pupils were happy to do so. It is interesting to note that Luisa still remembers clearly her early days at school in London, when she could not understand anything and felt very much the frightened outsider. This early lack of self-esteem and corresponding anxiety has continued to dog her school life. She tries hard to blend in and be "one of the gang". Her good footballing skills were a big help at primary school where she played on the school's mixed team. Unfortunately her secondary school lacks a girls' football team and she has largely abandoned this skill. Luckily a much loved baby brother arrived at about this time, and he has filled this gap in her life. She becomes very animated when discussion turns in this direction and she is clearly very proud of him.

She attended several inner London school for the next 5 years, but received no EAL support according to the sparse records which accompanied her. She moved again into Hertfordshire in Y6 where she attended a large ethnically mixed primary school. On arrival, the staff were initially unconcerned as her decoding skills were quite well developed. However it soon became apparent that she could not understand most of what she read. Her written work showed similar problems with understanding the required task, and was full of common EAL errors. The staff were initially reluctant to consider EMA support as they had more pressing cases, but the EMA teacher managed to see Luisa before registration and during breaks as well as include her in a reading comprehension group.

Luisa was reluctant to accept that she did not understand most of what she was reading, and it took some time to gain her confidence before she accepted that reading was actually more than a process of reproducing sounds to please the teacher. Eventually after working with Reciprocal Reading Techniques for some time (summarise, predict, clarify, ask a key question), Luisa came to see the importance of understanding what she read, and became much more enthusiastic about reading. In fact, she raced through the books given for her to take home, and her parents commented on this new phenomenon. In individual or small group work, Luisa was able to explore new vocabulary and began to recognise figurative language which had been causing her great difficulty.

Once she had become more comfortable with reading, it was possible to get her to look at her written work. She began to notice the different registers of written and spoken form, and compare different styles to various books she had read. However, her grasp of spelling patterns was very poor when she arrived in Y6, thus making her written work often difficult to understand as it also lacked any sort of punctuation.

She found it hard to follow the history topic, the 2nd World War, as she had no cultural experience of it, although she could grasp the idea of leaving a familiar home for somewhere strange. Nor was she able to appreciate the geography sessions, having never visited the sea, or even seen much of the countryside. She was unable to recognise many familiar landscapes such as arable farms with large wheat fields, or mixed farms with small fields full of unknown animals.

The EMA teacher flagged up Luisa's problems to the Learning Support team at the secondary school and was able to be there for Luisa's transfer visits which helped her over her anxieties

about the move to the much bigger school. This continuity of relationship has been very helpful to Luisa as she frequently was unsure initially of what was required of her, or how to find out the answers to any of her worries. She has been put into the school's reading recovery programme and there have been noticeable improvements in her spelling recently. By discussing her progress regularly with her subject teachers, it has been possible to track her growing confidence, and ensure that Luisa has not been overlooked, simply because she is a well-behaved, undemanding pupil. Her progress in Science, English and Maths has been noted, and she has not been allowed to drop into the lowest sets, as the EMA teacher has been able to point out that her understanding outstrips her ability to write down what she knows. Staff in these subjects have made great efforts to ensure that they allow Luisa the space to orally rehearse her written work, and have praised and encouraged her all efforts to improve her writing. Luisa herself feels that the move to secondary has gone quite well, and is quietly pleased with her progress.