

Bilingual and EAL specialist teaching assistants

Student teachers will benefit from an understanding of the specialist work of bilingual teaching assistants which has received little attention over the years. Their role and work should be included in any dedicated sessions on [working with EAL specialists and other support staff](#). A number of downloadable video resources (for example [Teachers TV](#)) are available which feature the work of specialist teaching assistants which may be usefully incorporated in such taught sessions, particularly where students are unlikely to work with such staff on their teaching placements. Exposure to [support materials](#) developed by bilingual teaching assistants can also form a useful discussion point.

Bilingual Teaching Assistants

The role of Bilingual Teaching Assistants (BTAs) has received little attention over the past 20 years. However, useful discussions of their position in the school system over this period may be found in Bourne (2001), Martin-Jones (2003) and Thompson (undated: Intercultural Education Partnership). An interview with Jill Bourne on the role of bilingual assistants can be found [here](#).

Bilingual Teaching Assistants (BTAs) work under the direction of the class teacher. BTAs use pupils' first language to support and develop their learning and draw on their knowledge of pupils' cultural background to activate their prior knowledge in relation to the subject or topic being taught. They need to be briefed about the teacher's plans and intentions for teaching and learning and in their contribution to these.

All specialist EAL teachers and bilingual teaching assistants play their part in supporting inclusion by facilitating participation and learning responding to pupils' diverse learning needs, setting suitable learning challenges and overcoming barriers to learning. BTAs knowledge of the contribution pupils' first language makes to academic success in EAL means they will not only interpret key words and instructions but also use pupils' first language to explore concepts in greater depth and to develop higher order learning skills that pupils can then transfer to EAL. They play an important role in sharing this knowledge with parents. They play an important role in helping to build pupils' confidence, self-esteem and independence so that all pupils are enabled to reach their full potential alongside their peers. Their work includes:

- effective support for bilingual pupils
- contributions to school awareness of the needs of bilingual pupils
- appropriate use of pupils' bilingual skills
- contributing ideas to the planning of teaching and the assessment of learning for bilingual learners
- keeping relevant and informative records
- facilitating supportive contact with parents

Specialist EAL Teaching Assistants

'Aiming High: Supporting Effective use of EMAG' (DfES, 2004) includes reference to the role of Specialist Teaching Assistants. In addition to Bilingual Teaching Assistants, this role may also include TAs with English as their first language who specialise in teaching pupils with English as an additional language. Where bilingual and other specialist Teaching Assistants are particularly expert and experienced, they would be considered for training or assessment for the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status.

The deployment of BTAs

In contexts where support is limited, many schools deploy bilingual classroom assistants over blocks of time such as half a term or one term for each class with specific support needs. In contexts where there is more generous deployment of BTAs, schools have often staggered their literacy lessons so that BTAs can support in two classes for a block of time. BTAs can provide class teachers with a particular insight into their target pupils' knowledge and understanding of curriculum areas. By communicating with children in their first language, BTAs will discover how well their language for learning has developed in their first language as well as their conceptual development and progress in learning.

Planning time for class teachers and BTAs is important so that BTAs

- receive information about the learning objectives in advance of the lessons and can prepare to support their target pupils in participating in and understanding the activities planned.
- may provide culturally and linguistically diverse resources for the lesson.
- may select specific resources to support the target pupils in the activities

- may familiarise pupils with concepts that are new to them because of the progression of the curriculum in their home country

In addition to the planning and subsequent delivery of support, BTAs need the opportunity to feedback on the outcomes of support. Many schools have a range of feedback mechanisms, ranging from discussion at the end of the session to link books and feedback sheets.

References

Bourne, J. (2001) 'Doing "what comes naturally": how the discourses and routines of teachers' practice constrain opportunities for bilingual support in UK primary schools' in *Language and Education Vol 15: 4*, 2001

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Thompson, A. (undated) 'Initial Teacher Training and Professional Development for Bilingual Classroom Assistants' in Scott, S. and Gibbon, P. (Eds.) (1999) *Sharing Practice in Intercultural Education. No. 1: The Professional Development Of Teachers*. London : Intercultural Education Partnership.

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