

HOME LANGUAGES in the Literacy Hour

by Jill Bourne, University of Southampton

Languages other than English spoken by children and young people outside school are referred to as community languages, home languages or first languages. In multilingual homes, children may be used to speaking two or more languages from their earliest years, making it difficult to identify their 'first' or strongest language. This paper, therefore, refers to children's 'home languages'.

'No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.'

The Bullock Report (1975): A Language for Life

Successful schools

- show they value all children's home languages;
- where possible, use home languages in teaching to support understanding;
- encourage and, where possible, build on children's literacy development in home languages as well as English.

WHY? Key Principles

- Use of home language;
- provides access to the curriculum for learners of English;
 - supports the understanding of concepts and knowledge;
 - enhances text comprehension, discussion, reflection, analysis and personal response to texts;
 - leads to the construction of richer texts;
 - supports development of learning and thinking skills;
 - contributes to the development of English through transferable skills;
 - encourages teachers to raise their expectations of learners by providing more accurate assessment of attainment.

What is learned in one language is easily transferred into a second language

Children learning to read and write in a home language are not just developing home language skills. Reading and writing strategies learned in one language transfer to the other.

Beginner as well as fluent readers can develop literacy skills and strategies in the home language which will support them in learning to read and write in English through, for example:

- understanding that texts convey meaning;
- understanding how scripts are used to construct and convey their own meanings;
- understanding the effective use of the 'searchlights' – including phonic awareness and knowledge;
- use of context, syntactic and semantic cues;
- skills such as skimming, scanning and drawing inferences;
- metalinguistic awareness.

Children progress best if the home language continues to be maintained and developed while English is introduced.

Supporting home languages enhances children's cognitive and language development by increasing:

- understanding of how spoken and written language works;
- success in learning additional languages;

- increases children's overall levels of attainment;
- **improves metalinguistic awareness of all children.**

The use of the home language encourages children to be active learners, to participate in lessons and to develop their thinking skills.

'My mother taught me to decode text in Bengali very early using phonic skills. As I was already a competent speaker of Bengali I was able to operate on the semantic and syntactic level with comparative ease. Reading in Bengali made sense to me. My literacy development in Hindi was interesting, linguistically speaking. It demonstrated clearly how knowledge and skills are transferable between languages ... My mother used the same processes and principles as with Bengali to teach me Hindi. As Hindi shared a common lexis with my other languages it was not difficult for me to extend my vocabulary in Hindi; decoding words in Hindi made sense to me ... The story of my learning to read in English (which was my third language at this stage) may appear quite simple at one level. Learning the alphabet followed a singsong pattern and was accompanied by vowel practice – for example, "The cat sat on the mat" – to decode simple words. My mother used the same method of teaching me the grapho-phonetic principles in English as she had in Bengali and Hindi. I felt secure with the process. I remember that learning and applying these skills, albeit differently, was not a problem at all.'

Manjula Datta (2000) 'Bilinguality and Literacy', *Continuum* (p. 5)

There is a positive effect on learners' identity, self-concept and self-esteem, increasing their chances of successful learning.

Where a first language is given real status in the classroom:

- new arrivals settle in more readily;
- children participate more actively and confidently;
- children draw on all their language and

literacy knowledge in order to learn;

- teachers are able to recognise children's full range of strengths; this improved assessment raises expectations and improves planning for teaching;
- parents and community are encouraged to participate in their children's education;
- understanding between different ethnic groups improves.

How?

Developing bilingual learners need:

- recognition of the role played by home languages in the development of English;
- a welcoming environment in which they feel confident in participating;
- enhanced opportunities for speaking and listening in home languages;
- to see multilingual print in the school environment;
- effective models of spoken and written languages;
- high quality, culturally relevant visual aids and resources;
- bilingual teachers and/or teaching assistants;
- detailed profiling of their continuing linguistic development in English and other languages to enable further planning and target setting.

Ways of using home language(s) as a regular and key teaching strategy will differ depending on the school intake and context, where:

- bilingual teachers/teaching assistants share the home language of most of the children in the class and enable teaching and learning using home language as well as English;
- bilingual teachers/teaching assistants share the home language of some of the pupils in the class and support creation of policy and practice which encourages all children to use and share their languages and scripts;
- no adults share the home languages of bilingual learners but all languages and literacies are *explicitly* welcomed and *put to use for learning* in the classroom through the organisation of talk partners, in role play, 'hotseating', collaborative groupwork,

organisation of the 'writing area'; with the addition of books in other languages and dual languages, bilingual wordcharts and alphabets, dictionaries, bilingual visitors and relevant excursions.

Using home languages to support the Literacy Hour

'EAL learners who already know the sound system of another language and the principles of phonology and spelling can bring that awareness to bear when learning to read and write in English ... Managed carefully, talking about literacy in languages other than English can help EAL pupils to identify points of similarity and difference between languages at word, sentence and text level.' (DfEE 1998, p. 107)

Early literacy

Children's home language can be used to:

- teach a love of books, stories and poetry through the stronger language;
- provide pre-teaching before the class Literacy Hour (talking through shared reading and shared writing);
- revisit texts used for shared and guided reading;
- prompt and praise during shared and guided work;
- encourage discussion and personal response during shared and guided work;
- increase participation and ownership during independent work;
- compare scripts and phonic correspondences;
- develop fine motor control in sharing known scripts;
- teach phonological awareness, using puppets and drama;
- compare phonic cues;
- construct meaningful sentences for early writing, based on children's own interests and experiences;
- maintain and develop children's literacy skills already developed in the home language.

Key Stage 1 Example

Before the Literacy Hour, a bilingual teaching assistant and children talk through the pictures and summarise the story of a Big Book in the home language. During shared reading with the whole class, the class teacher and teaching assistant work collaboratively, with the teaching assistant prompting, encouraging participation, explaining, translating and responding to pupils' comments in home language. Due to joint planning and a clear shared understanding of the objectives, the input enhances learning rather than detracting from the teacher's input. During guided reading, the bilingual assistant prompts for cueing strategies in home language, but accepts whichever language the children wish to use in participating, translating as necessary for other children in the group who do not share the language. On another day during shared writing, children use partner talk in shared home languages for oral composition and contribute to whole-class discussion in preferred language. In the graphic area, children are encouraged to examine and practise writing letters in a home language, developing fine motor control using a range of different materials. In a later lesson, comparing alphabets will help them understand further how spoken language is represented in symbols.

'Billy's language background included Thai, his mother's language, and English, spoken by his father ... His mother was making efforts to teach him the alphabet in Thai – using a booklet with brightly coloured pictures – as well as English. But she was concerned that, at the age of four, he was not keen on writing at home. Billy did not often choose to write in the nursery either ... However, Billy's mother told us that he became enthusiastic at home when she wrote letters to the family in Thai. He would ... write symbols on his own sheet of paper. So Billy's mother sat in the nursery one morning, writing several lines addressed to Billy's grandmother in Thai. Billy sat alongside her with his own airletter form, which he filled with symbols and lines in several colours. ... Later that morning [unusually] Billy spent about fifteen minutes in the nursery's writing area, at the table where the airletter event had taken place ... He produced a number

of symbols including some which were quite complex and resembled his mother's Thai writing' (Kenner, 2001). Following this episode, Billy became a more enthusiastic writer, both at home and in the nursery.

impact ... During shared writing, the teacher scribed a similar story using pupil contributions which encouraged the application of learning from shared reading and sentence level work ... During independent writing, the children worked in pairs to plan and write a similar story, using home languages as well as English to support their discussion.

More fluent readers and writers

Home language can be used to develop higher-order literacy and cognitive skills, with or without an adult who shares the home language.

At text level:

- discussing characterisation or cause and effect;
- making predictions;
- drawing inferences;
- discussing personal responses;
- planning their own writing.

At sentence and word level:

- focusing on sentence structure;
- comparing grapho-phonemic correspondences;
- comparing vocabulary items and word choices, etc.;
- enhancing their writing by selecting vocabulary from home language for impact.

Key Stage 2 Example (Classroom observation)

'The teacher reads an extract from a West African story as part of the Literacy Hour. In independent writing, pairs of children plan and write a similar story, using other languages as well as English. In guided writing, teacher and children compare and analyse the construction of their texts and different effects created in different languages' (Gravelle 2000).

Extracts from an account of observation of classroom practice

During shared reading of a story from West Africa, children explored strategies for working out the meaning of Yoruba words and their impact upon the reader ... During sentence level work, the teacher explored how those words and phrases fit into English syntax, and where they did not. Pupils were encouraged to formulate sentences which included words from their own home languages and to consider the

Use of bilingual adults

Teachers and bilingual adults need to work in partnership to ensure that the expertise is used effectively. In addition to teaching, bilingual adults can:

- **plan with class teachers** opportunities for the effective use of home language to meet the learning objectives at different points in the lesson; for example, in introducing a topic, reinforcing concepts, reviewing, capturing children's attention, giving praise, marking a change of topic, marking a change from formal to informal talk, to gain rapport with a child, etc.;
- **work with class teachers to assess learning as well as progress made by bilingual learners;**
- **support the teachers in constructing a profile of the children's proficiency and abilities in home language as well as English;**
- **use home language to discuss with pupils their progress and personal targets;**
- **engage parents/carers in discussions about children's progress and attainment, learning targets and parental involvement in children's learning;**
- **support the teachers in finding out** about home reading and writing practices, so that the teacher can build on home experiences;
- **contribute to teacher knowledge of** the ways in which the other languages differ in form and function from English (*for example in word order – the verb comes in the final position in a sentence in Bengali and Punjabi; or in pointing out areas where vocabulary can cover a wider range of meaning, e.g. 'aangadi' in Gujarati refers to toes as well as fingers; identifying phonemes that do not exist in first*

language and therefore may need focused teaching);

- *contribute to knowledge and understanding of links between language and culture, e.g. differing forms of distinguishing kinship relationships; cultural differences in relation to colours – e.g. red for a wedding; white for a funeral; different ways of expressing politeness.*

It is important to make sure bilingual support is used for learning, not simply for classroom management. This means thinking carefully about how and when, and with whom, each language is introduced.

Principles into practice

For home languages to be used effectively to support learning, there should be whole-school discussion of:

- principles and purposes for using home languages and scripts, with a focus on raising attainment and supporting learning across the curriculum;
- effective deployment of bilingual staff with clearly defined roles and responsibilities;
- strategies for use of home languages when adults who share the languages are not available;
- joint planning time for teachers and bilingual assistants;
- planning when in a lesson each language is best used;
- strategies for encouraging peer, group and pair work in home languages shared by the children;
- strategies for organising flexible and changing work groups, sometimes involving children with shared languages, at other times mixed groups communicating through English.
- a programme of professional development for all staff to develop expertise in the use of home languages to meet the needs of all learners.

A clear vision of the contribution of home languages shared by the community of school staff, management, governors, parents and pupils should lead to an enhancement in self-esteem, motivation and achievement for all learners.

Useful references

Baker, C (2001) *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism*. Multilingual Matters.

Baker, C and Prys Jones (1998) *Encyclopaedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*.

Cummins, J (2000) *Language, power and pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Datta, M (2000) *Bilinguality and Literacy: principles and practice*. Continuum.

Gravelle, M (2000) *Planning for bilingual learners: an inclusive curriculum*. Trentham.

Gregory, E (1996) *Making sense of a new world: learning to read in a second language*. Paul Chapman.

Evans, J (ed) (2001) *'The Writing Classroom'*. David Fulton.

Kenner, C (2001) *'A place to start from: encouraging bilingual children's writing'* in Evans, J (ed) *The Writing Classroom* op cit.