



# Multilingualism and home language

*Speaking more than one language is an asset.*

- Children's home language and literacy experience needs to be recognised and built on in the classroom.
- Effective learning and teaching for bi-/multilingual (and all other) children offers opportunities for meaningful contexts in which to read, talk and write.
- A secure, authentic learning environment for language teaching uses culturally relevant resources and offers collaborative learning experiences.

## **Multilingualism**

We live in an ever more diverse and multicultural society in which a high proportion of children and adults speak more than one language. Having competence in more than one language should be celebrated and encouraged as it is recognised that bilingualism stimulates brain development and helps cognitive development in children (Sigman, 2017). UKLA supports the view that multilingualism is an asset and a resource, but is not always fully valued in the classroom. All teachers in schools where there are bi-/multilingual children need to be familiar with the language learning process, if they are to effectively support all children and enable them to achieve their full potential. Classroom practice will need to reflect an understanding of how children acquire an additional language and how to best support that learning (Naldic 1998; Drury, 2007). Effective language learning takes place in a meaningful context, with planned opportunities for purposeful communication (Genesee, 1987). It is crucial, therefore, that teachers recognise and value the linguistic and metacognitive skills that children possess, and build on the cultural values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences that they bring in from the home

environment (Issa and Öztürk, 2008). Effective learning and teaching integrates language and content learning, and offers opportunities for meaningful contexts in which to read, talk and write.

UKLA maintains that it is not possible to view multilingual people as one homogenous group; rather they are individuals with a wide range of particular needs, different language and literacy backgrounds, and with varying degrees of exposure to British culture and the English language. Learners bring with them different cultural and lived experiences; they make sense of the world around them through shared experiences and cultural activities. Language is not just a naming system, nor is it effectively taught or learnt in isolation.

## **Home language**

UKLA maintains that one of the key principles for additional language learning is that the learner is able to draw upon knowledge and language skills already acquired (Cremin *et al.*, 2015). Languages used or known at home may reflect the complex language situations of the parents' countries of origin and children may have access to languages other than English for social, religious or cultural reasons. The role of the home language, therefore, and prior language knowledge is extremely important in additional language educational contexts. Bi/multilingual children's early development of concepts is through the home language. It is crucial that this is facilitated in the school context, and that children are encouraged to play and learn using their home language as well as English.

UKLA is committed to the provision of a secure, authentic learning environment for language teaching which:

- supports the use of the home language alongside additional language learning
- promotes thinking and talking in the home language to support understanding
- uses culturally relevant resources
- offers challenging collaborative learning experiences
- specifically introduces the language of literacy
- integrates language learning with thematic subject teaching.

Learners who are encouraged to access their prior knowledge through the language and culture most familiar to them can call on a rich array of schemata, whereas those who only use the knowledge they have learned in the second/additional language are limited in their access. Bi-/ multilingual children have two or more words for objects and ideas, so links between words and concepts are looser, allowing more fluent and creative thinking (Baker, 2002).

Education and education policy, therefore, has a key role in ensuring that multilingualism in the UK receives the support it deserves. Teachers should make use of the linguistic diversity in their student populations and value the languages which children bring into the classroom in order to provide language-rich environments (Taylor, 2013).

## Sources

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## Classroom example

### No barriers to learning

*By Jamie Marshall, Year 4 Class Teacher and Mathematics Lead,  
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Mara joined my class of eight- and nine-year-olds at the start of the Spring term. She had never been to this country before; however, she had learnt some English in her Romanian school and at home from her older sister and mother. At the beginning, she was very quiet, but did make eye contact and smiled. She didn't take long to try and join in with a few words in English. She often laughed at her teachers when they tried to speak a few words in Romanian! Mara's mother can speak a number of different languages and has taught herself English. Mara had the advantage, therefore, of a lot of help at home. After six months, Mara was able to write a story with characters showing that she had grasped the spelling of many high frequency words, and also that she understood how to edit her writing in English.

There are many different strategies that can be used to enable children who have English as an additional language to feel included and independent within a classroom. We use a school 'Welcome pack' which has lots of initial activities in it to learn more about the individual child, their family, their likes and dislikes, and their initial knowledge of English. We had established that Mara was capable in her own language, through talking to her mother and seeing her write in class, so initially we encouraged Mara to write in her first language before gently encouraging her to try and include some English words as well. As we have a reasonably large number of bi-/ multilingual children in our school, we found Mara a buddy Romanian speaker (we had another Romanian speaking child in our class already), as well as another child in an older year, who we could call upon to translate things if we needed them to. This also gave Mara a respite from speaking in English and a safe contact around the school. We made and maintained close contact with her mother, and this helped her to settle into her new school quickly.

In regular classroom work we found the following supportive:

- taking the register in Romanian and other languages. This helped Mara to settle into the class and feel accepted
- talking to her in English. We also (gently) insisted that she replied in English
- we included Romanian in some of our displays e.g. the date
- we partnered her with a buddy, who was not just a strong writer, but also an eloquent speaker, to sit next to her
- she had access on her table to an iPad to use for Google translate
- we often provided sentence opener templates or conjunction reminders, to help Mara structure sentences
- I often did pre-teaching with Mara, introducing her to the key language that she would hear in the next set of lessons
- we provided her with key word mats, which included a picture stimulus (in our school we have access to 'Widgit'; however this does require a subscription)
- when Mara read through her writing we focused a lot on the sounds that she had produced with her letters. This enabled her to see how the letters she had written were communicated out loud. We would then say the word clearly and we asked her to try and spell it again
- we had a selection of bilingual fiction books available for her to read
- some of the concrete objects in the classroom were labelled with Romanian/ English labels
- we often used drama and role play in our writing sessions and this took away the language barrier – a child on all fours barking like a dog is a dog!

At the beginning, Mara wasn't keen on speaking English. It probably took her about two weeks or so to build up her confidence enough to speak to a teacher in short English phrases. This 'silent period' must not be rushed or overlooked. Inclusiveness was key: Mara always wanted to do the same activities as the other children and we tried to make this happen as much as possible. Once she was feeling confident and settled she was happy to teach other children her language. When I asked what had helped her the most when she first joined our school,

she said, ‘the instructions being said to me twice.’ She also commented that having key words on paper helped her to write. When I asked her what she found most difficult about being in a school where she did not speak the language, she said, ‘answering questions with speaking.’ Overall though, she said that she enjoys being in the school. Since she was in my class she has formed a very close relationship with another girl and I often see them together in the playground. This will of course help her English develop more strongly than any teacher could do!

A longer version of this account, with Mara’s writing examples, appeared in *English 4-11* Summer, 2019.

*Alayne Öztürk, Jamie Marshall and Liam Willimott on behalf of UKLA*

See also

**UKLA bookshop** [www.ukla.org/shop](http://www.ukla.org/shop)

*Inclusive Approaches to Teaching Literacy in the Secondary School*

Edited by Eve Bearne

*Literacy and Community*

Edited by Eve Bearne and Rebecca Kennedy

*Practical Bilingual Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms*

by Tözün Issa and Alayne Öztürk

**UKLA website** [www.ukla.org/resources](http://www.ukla.org/resources)

*Diversity and Inclusion* resources for members

*Developing a Culturally Inclusive Curriculum*

by Jane Bednall and Sharon Fell

<https://ukla.org/resources/search?keywords=%22culturally%22>

Series: *Diverse Picturebooks*

by Hannah Lawrence and Samantha Jane Hulston

<https://ukla.org/resources/collection/diverse-picturebooks>

UKLA Occasional Paper: *English as an Additional Language (EAL)*

by Naomi Flynn

UKLA funded research: *Rivers of Multilingual Reading: Torrent or trickle?*

led by Sabine Little of Sheffield University

<https://ukla.org/research/projects/details/rivers-of-multilingual-reading-torrent-or-trickle>

UKLA Special Interest Group: *Literacy and Multilingualism*

<https://ukla.org/cpd/sig/details/literacy-and-multilingualism-sig>