

# TEACHING MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN



**ADVICE FOR  
TEACHERS**

More than 300 different languages are spoken in UK schools. Learning English is important for multilingual children to integrate in the community and make progress at school. At the same time growing up with more than one language is a great opportunity for them.

Research tells us that multilingual children may:

- Develop stronger social skills
- Be better able to understand how languages work
- Have enhanced skills in literacy because they have knowledge about languages
- Have enhanced skills in creativity and problem solving
- Have a strong sense of cultural identity and are able to communicate with their extended family

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **How long does it take for a child to develop competence in English when it is not their mother tongue?**

On average, it typically takes about two years to develop verbal competence and it may take up to 5 to 7 years to develop academic competence (understanding the vocabulary and concepts specific to each subject). Studies show that older children, such as those in Key Stage 2, who are already fluent in their native language and know how to read and write, can achieve proficiency more quickly than younger children.

### **Should I advise parents to speak English at home?**

Getting some exposure to English before starting school is certainly useful for children, but it is also crucial that parents keep using their native language at home. There is evidence that getting non-native English input from parents may end up doing more harm than good to children, and it also reduces the opportunities for more meaningful and rich exchanges in their native language. It is equally important to encourage parents to support their children's development of literacy skills in the home language: studies show that some literacy skills can transfer from one language to the other.

### **What should I do if a child uses both languages in the classroom?**

Multilingual children sometimes switch back and forth between languages, but that does not mean that they are confused about what language they are speaking. They may switch because a word in English does not occur to them, but also because a concept, or a joke, may be better conveyed in their native language. If there is a situation in the classroom where sticking to English is preferable, the teacher may wish to encourage rather than correct.

### **Is learning English grammar helpful for multilingual children?**

Research shows that introducing children to the explicit conventions of written English can be very helpful. By learning grammar, children are encouraged to notice and analyse the properties and regularities of a language and this may help them make sense of it. They will also have another language to compare with English and this 'meta knowledge' about language is a key advantage for multilingual learners.



### **If I teach a multilingual child that is fluent in English, how much additional support do I still need to offer him/her?**

Research shows that even if a bilingual child receives as much as 80% of their language input in English, this is not equivalent to getting 100% as is the case for a monolingual child. Often, these very fluent multilingual children still need support to access content and to learn how to use subject-specific academic language. You can draw on the DfE Proficiency Scales to support your understanding of how fluent a child is.

### **How do I evaluate how much support a multilingual child will need in my class?**

We advise making a pupil profile by gathering information on the child's family and their educational background. For example, is the child literate in their home language? How many languages are spoken in the family and what is the main language of the home? How many years of school did the child complete before coming to the UK? Did the family migrate by choice or necessity? Some local authorities have very good examples of pupil profiles for multilingual learners which we recommend schools try and use.

### **Is it more challenging for multilingual children to learn another European language at Key-Stage 2?**

There is no evidence that learning two languages at the same time is problematic for children. Multilingual children can sometimes be better language learners than monolingual children because they are more used to noticing regularities in a language and more open to new sounds.

### **Should we offer a support plan out of the classroom?**

Depending on the nature of what is being taught, spending time out of class with a learning support assistant can be useful. For example, teachers may wish to offer some pre-teaching where the child is guided through the vocabulary of a lesson that will be taught shortly after. Already knowing the meaning of the words that will be used will allow the child to focus all of his or her attention on the content of the lecture.



## USEFUL TOOLS

If you have concerns that a multilingual child in your class may suffer from language disorders or delays, ask the parents to complete the ALDeQ questionnaire. This consists of questions about early milestones, family history and current abilities and can be used to identify evidence of delay or difficulties in the first language. You can download the ALDeQ questionnaire by visiting the Bilingualism Matters section of the CeLM website.

To build the multilingual child's pupil profile, you can start by asking the family to complete the ALEQ questionnaire. This consists of questions about the child's background, and specifically about the family's migration history, the parents' education level and the relative use of English and other languages at home. You can download the ALEQ questionnaire by visiting Bilingualism Matters section of the CeLM website.



## WHO ARE WE?

The Centre for Literacy and Multilingualism at the University of Reading is the host of a branch of Bilingualism Matters, which provides research-based advice and information on child multilingualism to anyone interested in or involved with raising, educating and caring for bilingual and multilingual children.

## HOW CAN WE HELP?

- Browse our website for more useful resources
- Get in touch if there is a specific topic you would like to know more about
- Invite us to give a talk about multilingualism and language disorders

## MULTILINGUALISM IN SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

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