

Supporting Multilingual Learners in Early Years Settings

By Sian Hudson, Executive Headteacher, St Edmund's Nursery School, Bradford

At St Edmund's Nursery School, we embrace the rich tapestry of languages and cultures our children bring. In early years, we're moving away from the term "EAL" (English as an Additional Language). For our youngest learners, it's not just about adding English; they're often developing their home language(s) and English side-by-side. They are Multilingual Learners (MLLs), and this perspective celebrates their incredible linguistic potential from the start.

Building Confidence and Connecting

Supporting MLLs effectively starts with us, the educators. We need to feel confident and brave enough to try different ways of communicating. This might mean learning a few words in a child's home language, or getting comfortable using gestures and Makaton. Remember, "one word is a great place to start!" Learning to say 'hello' or a child's name correctly, or offering a simple English word like 'help', can make a huge difference in building connection and trust.

Communication is key for children's development, especially for MLLs. We know from research that high-quality adult-child interactions are crucial for language growth (Verhoeven et al., 2010). For our MLLs, reading body language, understanding tone, and making eye contact are vital. A warm smile, patience, and simple gestures can bridge language gaps, showing children they are valued and understood.



The Power of Play

Play is a superpower for language learning! It's how young children naturally explore, interact, and solve problems. For MLLs, play creates a **low-pressure environment** where they can experiment with new sounds and words without fear of making mistakes. Learning language during play is much more meaningful than just memorisation or flashcards. Play encourages social interaction, allowing children to practise English with peers and develop social language skills. It also supports their overall development, building imagination, problem-solving, and emotional well-being. A recent study found that play-based learning environments were particularly beneficial for early language development in diverse groups of children (Rao et al., 2021).

Books are another cornerstone of language development. Reading aloud builds relationships and expands vocabulary. We carefully choose books for our setting:

- **Wordless picture books** allow children to tell stories in any language, encouraging narrative skills.
- **Books with predictable, repeated patterns** help children quickly pick up new English phrases.
- Crucially, we ensure children can '**see themselves**' in the stories and characters. This helps them feel a sense of belonging and makes reading more engaging.
- We also strongly encourage **parents to share stories in their home languages**. This strengthens family bonds and supports a child's overall language and literacy development (Tabors & Snow, 2014).



Partnerships with Families

Our most important partners are families. Parents are a child's first and most enduring educators. The EEF's guide on 'Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning' highlights the profound positive impact of strong home-school partnerships. For MLLs, this is even more critical. By working together, understanding cultural nuances, and encouraging continued home language development, we create a truly supportive and cohesive learning environment for every child.

Supporting MLLs is about celebrating the richness of languages and cultures. By connecting with children through play, thoughtful communication, diverse books, and strong family partnerships, we ensure every child, regardless of their linguistic background, thrives in our early years setting.

References

- Rao, A. K., et al. (2021). The impact of play-based learning on language development in preschool children: A systematic review. *Journal of Early Childhood Education*.
- Tabors, P. O., & Snow, C. E. (2014). English learners in preschool: What research tells us about the optimal conditions for children's development. In F. Genesee (Ed.), *Language development and education: The impact of teachers and learners* (pp. 53-73). Cambridge University Press.
- Verhoeven, L., van Leeuwe, J., & Overtoom, K. (2010). The contribution of parent-child interaction to early literacy development: A meta-analysis. *Journal of School Psychology*, 48(4), 341-356.

Over the next academic year we will continue to focus on these vital skills and would love to hear from you about any needs you would like support with. We would love to work with you to deliver any bespoke training, designed for your setting.

Get in touch with Helen, our Early Years Stronger Practice Hub Training and Development Lead - sp@stedmundsbradford.org.uk



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Early Years
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