

English as an Additional Language Service

Supporting Young Bilingual Learners
across the Scottish Borders

Balmoral Primary School Balmoral Avenue
Galashiels TD1 1JJ



Contents

Foreword	P3
The Silent Period	P4
Support Strategies	P6
Other Ways Bilingual Pupils can be supported	P8
The Role of Parents	P9
When Should a Referral be made	P11
Questions to ask	P12

This document was compiled by Liz Scarpa EAL teacher on behalf of the EAL Team

Foreword

For many bilingual learners, including UK born children, their first real contact with English is when they enter nursery. Where a language other than English has been spoken at home, the bilingual child is suddenly moving to an environment where they are encountering not only a language possibly unfamiliar to them, but also different cultural and social expectations.

It is important to remember, that although new to English, bilingual children bring with them a rich and highly developed linguistic knowledge which provides strong foundations and transferable language skills. These are imperative when learning a new language. Research from across the globe unequivocally endorses the importance of speaking, developing and maintaining the home language and the vital role this plays in second language acquisition.

The home language is an invaluable tool for helping young bilingual learners access the curriculum and understand concepts and ideas in English. At a stage where children's language skills are developing and evolving, the first language and a child's aptitude, strengths and weaknesses in this, provide vital information and clues on their ability to acquire another language.

The Silent Period

One of the most common concerns voiced about all new bilingual learners is their lack of oral communication in English.

This is known as “the silent period” and can last up to a year. It is an important and natural stage of second language acquisition.

Some of the reasons why a child will go through the silent period include:

- A new setting– the child may feel insecure, confused and uncertain about their new environment.
- The child’s personality– if a child is naturally shy they will find it difficult to initiate and engage in conversations in a language which is not their own. If a child is a perfectionist often they will be reluctant to speak in their newly acquired language until they are able to do this accurately.
- Cultural expectations– a child’s conventions and cultural expectations with regards to oral interaction may be very different to the nursery environment. A bilingual learner may therefore need to decode and understand the new conventions before they feel confident to speak
- There may be a language delay– it is important to remember that language delay will be present in all the child’s languages and therefore information needs to be gathered from parents about first language acquisition. If parents have similar concerns regarding the child’s first language development and confirm issues regarding speech and language, then a referral to SALT (Speech and Language Therapist) should be made.
- The duration of the silent period varies from child to child and is influenced by a number of factors.
- Speaking English at home will not help young bilingual learners overcome the silent period. It will only cause confusion and distress as well as devaluing the child’s own language and culture.

- Throughout the silent period children are still learning and acquiring new language.
- Throughout the silent period bilingual learners will be able to show their understanding through non-verbal cues.
- As bilingual children begin to gain confidence in their new language they will begin to repeat words, utter single words and slowly build these up to short phrases.



Support Strategies for Young Bilingual Learners

First steps:

- Children learn a great deal of language from their peers, therefore place the bilingual child next to someone who is articulate and will provide a good model of language and is supportive of the new bilingual learner.
- Allow the child to make friends and become familiar with the nursery, its routine and environment as this will be very different to previous experiences. If the child feels at ease and settled, this creates a much better atmosphere and incentive for learning.
- Provide visual clues with labels for different areas of the nursery/ routines/visual timetable which relate to day to day routines and activities. Point to the relevant pictures and discuss these with the child encouraging repetition of what these are called.
- Allow the child to use their home language whenever they wish. Continuing to develop the home language helps with their acquisition of English. Children with the same linguistic background can support each other and their learning through their first language.
- Teaching all children simple greetings/words in the child's first language can really boost confidence and self- esteem.

LISTENING

- Repeat key words and encourage the child to repeat after you. Use key visuals to reinforce understanding.
- Use the child's name and make eye contact to focus on key information.
- Be consistent with your use of language and the language used for giving instructions.
- Use repetition to provide the learner with more than one opportunity to understand.
- Allow extra time for the child to process new information.
- Use positive feedback as encouragement when the child has shown understanding to boost confidence.

- In order to keep a bilingual learner focused and engaged when reading a story or introducing a new activity or topic, ask the bilingual learner to ring a bell/clap their hands/etc. when they hear a key word being read/mentioned. Ask an articulate member of the class to demonstrate how this is done. Children can then count how many times the key word has been mentioned and get a sticker/reward.

SPEAKING

- Allow the child to use their first language.
- Encourage the child to repeat words/phrases.
- Model answers for children particularly when asking questions. For instance if asking a child which activity they want to take part in, ask: “Do you want to play a game or draw a picture?” (The child can recognise and repeat their chosen option) rather than: “What would you like to do now?” whereby the child may not be able to find the correct words to express what their chosen option is and therefore not answer.
- Encourage/engineer social interaction with learners through practical activities and games. Adult intervention can ensure that language is scaffolded and modelled.
- Initially, don’t focus too much on grammatical inaccuracies and provide lots of praise in recognition of the effort the bilingual child has put into speaking.
- Group with articulate native speakers who will provide a good model of language.
- Make allowances for a child’s natural shyness.
- Keep a record of progress being made in speaking– i.e.: repeating/ beginning to use simple phrases/sentences.

USING STORIES

- Think of the context of the stories: is this culturally biased? Often it is the cultural barrier which interferes with comprehension.
- Try and give children opportunities to access stories in their home language before introducing them in class so that the bilingual child has an understanding of the context and storyline.
- Whenever possible choose a story from a dual language book whereby the story can also be shared at home in the child’s home language.

- Use story sacks for developing new vocabulary and comprehension.
- Encourage parents to discuss pictures in the story and ask inference/prediction questions in the home language to help with comprehension.
- When reading a story to the children ensure that the bilingual child can refer and relate to the pictures in the story to aid comprehension.
- Revisit and repeat key vocabulary from stories to develop learning of new vocabulary.
- Encourage bilingual parents to come and share stories in their own language with all the children.



Other Ways in which Bilingual Learners can be Supported

- Remember that a new language is best acquired when used in context and not as a separate activity. Fully involve bilingual learners in all activities in the classroom preferably with adult support initially to model tasks.
- Use ICT for language/maths games to reinforce new language.
- Listen to audio versions of stories to help with comprehension.
- Play group games to help develop social skills and the language of turn taking.
- Pre-teach the language for specific activities and tasks. (this can be done through support from home in the child's first language too.)
- Use bilingual ANAs/ volunteers to help bridge the gap between English and the home language.
- Value and celebrate the child's language and culture through activities embedded in the curriculum.
- Provide picture/contextual clues for new language/activities to help with comprehension.

The Important Role of Parents and their Involvement

- Parents' knowledge and understanding of English can vary enormously. Even where parents are able to have a simple straightforward conversation it may be difficult to effectively communicate more serious concerns.
- Parents of bilingual children have come from a different educational system and may therefore not fully understand the ethos and structure of Scottish Education and the aims of early years provision.

HOW CAN THIS BE ADDRESSED?

- Organise an open evening/afternoon whereby bilingual parents are invited to the school and the early years curriculum and expectations are explained. This can also be a great opportunity to explain how learning can be supported and consolidated at home through the use of the first language. **In order for such an event to be successful, interpreters need to be available to enable a two way exchange between school and parents.** Such an event could be organised through clusters/associated primaries to cut down on costs and repetition.
- Parents play an invaluable role in their children's learning. Irrespective of their own language barrier, they can reinforce learning and concepts through the home language. Some examples of these are:
 - Numbers– number sequence is the same in any language and children's learning can easily be reinforced in the home language.
 - Prediction activities, discussion of stories, Bloom's Taxonomy questioning can be done in any language to support and develop comprehension and critical language skills.
 - Familiar stories can be read/told in the home language to reinforce comprehension.
 - Partnership and exchanging information honestly with parents is paramount to understanding and providing for the needs of the bilingual child. Again, interpreters play an invaluable role where the language barrier impedes communication.
 - Information from parents regarding a child's responses and interaction in the first language can help identify or confirm additional barriers to learning.

When Should a Referral Be Made?

- Bilingual children new to English need time to settle into their new environment and to adjust to their new language.
- By following the strategies in this booklet and liaising closely with parents, there should be no need for a referral to the EAL service particularly if children are making obvious progress in their understanding and slowly beginning to use English (albeit inaccurately) to communicate with adults and peers in the school context.
- In the majority of cases children, particularly in a nursery setting, progress through the different stages of language acquisition easily, and by the time they are ready for P1, are often on a par with their monolingual peers.
- Should there still be concerns about English language acquisition please refer to the questions in the following section which should help identify if support may be required from other agencies.

If after careful consideration of all of the above points you feel there is a reason to refer to the EAL Service, please think about what targets would meet the child's needs best.



Questions to ask if I have a concern with regards to a Bilingual Learner in my Class

Sometimes, other additional support needs can be masked by and attributed to the language barrier. As children become more confident and fluent in English, particularly in the early years context, frustration, poor behaviour, concentration and comprehension should all improve. Where this is not the case, information from parents regarding how children respond in their first language can really help identify whether some of these concerns can be attributed to other additional needs.

CONCERN: My bilingual child does not speak.

Questions to ask:

- How long have they been at the nursery/exposed to English?
- Does the child attend the nursery regularly?
- Has the child been given enough time to settle into their new environment and make sense of what is expected of them?
- Are they still going through the silent period?
- Have they made any tangible progress since starting at the nursery? i.e.; started to repeat words, put together simple phrases?
- Do they show understanding through the use of non-verbal cues?
- Do they speak to/interact with the other children during structured/unstructured activities?
- Do they communicate more easily with peers who share their language?
- Do they seem distressed?
- Is their contribution valued and encouraged?
- How does the child's use of oral English compare to the child's use of the first language at home? Has there been a language delay in the home language?
- Do the parents share similar concerns regarding the child's willingness to communicate in the first language?

Some Possible Answers:

- If the child has been in the nursery for less than a year and is making some progress, they should be given extra time and exposure to English using the support strategies.
- If the child has attended regularly for over a year and is still not communicating or showing understanding, prior to any referral, parents should be consulted to find out information about first language acquisition and if there are similarities.
- If parents express similar concerns then there may be other barriers to learning.
- Barriers to learning exist irrespective of which language the child is using, therefore further investigations need to be carried out if the child is causing concerns with regards to their first language development.

A USEFUL RULE OF THUMB TO DECIDE WHETHER A REFERRAL SHOULD BE MADE TO OUTSIDE AGENCIES IS: IF THIS WAS A MONOLINGUAL CHILD, WHAT COURSE OF ACTION WOULD BE TAKEN?

CONCERN: My bilingual child is trying to communicate but is very unclear in their speech.

Questions to ask:

- Are they just mispronouncing unfamiliar words?
- Is their speech unclear in all contexts– i.e. when they are relaxed, during play?
- Is the child beginning to use simple phrases or sentences?
- Is the child able to repeat single words clearly?

Some Possible Answers:

- Bilingualism does not cause language delay or disorders. These exist irrespective of which language a child is speaking.
- The key is to gather detailed information about language development in the first language. There will be similarities in the pattern of first and second language acquisition.
- Parents may have records of referrals/input already received in their home country.
- If parents confirm the school's concern then a referral should be made to Speech and Language Therapy (SALT).

- In the unlikely event that there is no correlation between the development of the child's first and second language acquisition the following strategies should be used initially:
- Continued exposure to good models of language.
- Repetition and practice of new words and sounds.
- Pre-teaching of key words and sounds relevant to accessing the curriculum.

CONCERN: My bilingual child is very physical and I am concerned about their behaviour.

Questions to ask:

- How long has the child been at the nursery?
- Does the child understand the behaviour code and what is acceptable/non acceptable behaviour?
- Has continued attendance seen an improvement or a deterioration in behaviour?
- Does the child seem distressed?
- Does the child respond appropriately to warnings/sanctions?
- Does the child behave differently towards adults/children of a different gender?

Some Possible Answers:

- If the child has recently arrived, they may need to understand appropriate behaviour, particularly as some cultures are more physical than others.
- Sometimes the language barrier can be frustrating, and children may become physical as a means of releasing frustration. Generally, as language and communication skills develop, there is also a marked improvement in behaviour.
- Parents' own behaviour code and accepted behaviour may be different to that of the nursery. It is therefore important to share mutual expectations and concerns and for positive behaviour to be rewarded at school and at home.
- If parents also have concerns about their child's behaviour, whereby this cannot be attributed to the frustration of functioning in a different language, there may well be underlying behavioural problems.
- If this is the case, the same steps should be applied as for a monolingual child.

Further Reading:

The following links provide access to useful information regarding second language acquisition in the early years.

For lots of good practice, information and links to other early years materials:

<http://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-teaching-and-learning/outline-guidance/early-years>

For useful information and support strategies:

http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media/pdf/8/4/EAL_in_Early_Years.pdf

For Edinburgh's EAL service nursery assessment checklist available to download:

<http://schools-online.org/cgi-bin/WebObjects/SchoolWebs.woa/22/wo/qKe4fLvoTAZ0GGZG6sZVu0/27.7.2.2.4.7.0.3.6.1.0.9.0?7,15>

For useful information for parents:

<http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/>

For Highland EAL Service's Nursery EAL Teddy Talk programme:

<http://ealhighland.org.uk/resources/teddy-talk-narrative-based-language-development-programme-eal-children-nursery-school/>

For more information please contact :

English as an Additional Language Service
sfitch@scotborders.gov.uk

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