

The Gift of Tongues



Unlocking the potential of pupils for whom English is not their first language is often a daunting challenge for teachers. But with care and good preparation, miracles can be achieved

Schools are under huge pressure from a dramatic rise in the number of children from European migrants' families, official figures show, and many teachers feel unprepared to teach children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Newly qualified teachers, for example, were asked last year to rate 25 aspects of teaching according to how well prepared they felt. Teaching these children came twenty-fourth for primary teachers and twenty-third for their secondary colleagues.

This is a particular concern for Catholic schools, which are more diverse than their community school neighbours, though this was not always so. For more than half a century, from the voyage of the Windrush on, immigration to Britain was mainly about people from the Caribbean or the Indian sub-continent settling in the industrial heartlands of the North, the Midlands and London. In the 1970s the Inner London Education Authority found that many Catholic schools were monocultural islands in an increasingly multi-ethnic sea. Today the situation is very different thanks, in part, to the expansion of the European Union in 2004, when Cyprus, Malta and eight Eastern European countries joined.

Wiktoria appeared in my classroom early in 2005. (Wiktoria was not her real name; in this article all the names are changed.) With not a word of English she sat for weeks solemnly staring at me like a frightened rabbit. Within a short while, two other children with EAL, Karol and Oscar, joined the school. It was not simply that immigrants started arriving in large numbers from different places; the migrants' destinations also changed.

The classroom in which Wiktoria and I gazed at each other in mutual incomprehension was in a small seaside town where few teachers had any experience of working with pupils whose first language was not English. Our school had no history with such pupils; the county's education department had no expertise to offer. Several of our new arrivals came to us having been turned away by other schools in the town, which did have one good outcome. "This has completely changed my view of the Catholic Church," a local authority officer told me, referring to the influx of migrants. "The Catholic schools in this county are by far the most welcoming communities."

As the weeks passed, Wiktoria started to chat to her classmates in the playground. One day she put up her hand in class, and before long she was one of my higher achievers – as Karol and Oscar also became in their classes. This is not uncommon: a study published in 2015 found that “EAL students make more progress than those with FLE [First Language English]”.

Admittedly, a government report from the same year found that one reason for this was that these pupils were more likely to have paid for private tuition, but the other explanations it offered were cultural: parents of children from ethnic minorities, including those with EAL, generally have “higher educational aspirations” and “greater involvement with their child’s school”; they are more likely to know where their children are when they are out, and less likely both to quarrel with their child and to be single. Marked by its absence from this list, uncomfortably for education professionals, is “good teaching”, or anything done in or by schools, but that does not mean we should do nothing.

Parents, as Vatican II reminded us, are children’s “primary and principal educators”; but the role of schools and teachers is to “aid parents in fulfilling their duties”. In my present school there are more than 30 first languages. It is quite common for a child to join us with no English, and the first rule of working with pupils with EAL is not to panic in the face of the initial silence. It will not last for ever.

In their first languages children listen long before they speak, and they read before they write. When a mother engages with her infant under two, the chatter and the picture books are freely offered with no expectation on the child except to listen, to look, to enjoy and to absorb. If we want to help children rapidly develop skills in a second language, we must give them one-to-one time when conversation, books, rhymes and stories can be shared.

Later, there are specific programmes that will consolidate skills, develop vocabulary, help fill any gaps, and sort out particular issues of syntax, but at the start what is needed is patience, conversation and a little unpressured individual attention. The great majority of the child’s time should be with his or her peers because these new friends will become important informal teachers; too much one-to-one time will actually delay the child’s exploration of language.

The process of language acquisition is speeded up if children feel comfortable, welcome and valued. There are dozens of ways of making sure this is the case in school. If, like us, many of your pupils come from Africa, Goa, Kerala and the Philippines, some images around the school, including religious icons, should have black and Asian faces. The “good morning” at the start of assembly or the Sign of the Cross with which we begin our prayers does not always have to be in English.

Parents should also be encouraged to share stories with children in their first languages, and our libraries should have a few books in other languages. It may seem initially as if the first language is hindering acquisition of English, but in time the two support each other: genuine bilingualism is not just an asset in the job market, it also helps in the development of learners’ memory, problem solving and creativity.

Not everything is always plain sailing. Communication with parents is crucial, and on occasion an interpreter might be needed to ensure the vital home-school partnership works properly. Rarely, EAL can mask a special educational need. If so, the first signs may surface in a child’s performance in subjects less dependent on language, such as maths, PE, music, art or design technology, and an

assessment in the child's first language can be important in diagnosing this.

There are specific techniques to support learning in class, including visuals, drama and role play, but in the end, as Wiktoria taught me, and as newly qualified teachers soon learn, good teaching for children with EAL is good teaching. Full stop.

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