

Foreign language learning in early childhood

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The effect on very young children of being plunged into another language environment worries this Early Childhood teacher. And rightly so, because it is quite common for international schools to take ever younger children into an Early Childhood programme unaware of the possible negative effects of doing so without mother tongue support. This is a call to all schools to examine their admissions practices as well as the research available on successful foreign language acquisition in young children.

Is the population of our international schools changing in Europe? It seems to me that, with the creation of the European Union, more and more professionals from the host country are choosing an international education for their children. At present, many Early Childhood centres across Europe have more children from one particular language group, usually that of the host country, and I would like to consider briefly what effect this will have on our classrooms and, in particular, what effect it will have on Early Childhood education in international schools.

When these young children arrive at school to participate in our Early Childhood programmes, they not only have no experience of school, but they have no knowledge of the language of instruction either. Their parents, usually working parents, leave them for up to eight hours a day in this foreign environment, babysitters pick them up after school and when their parents return there may or may not be time for a bedtime story in their own language. Is this a common picture on the international school scene? In my experience it is becoming increasingly so.

The problem

When are these children learning their mother tongue? Do they have enough exposure to their own language? Should international schools promote the home language and, if so, when and where? In most international schools the language of instruction is English. In the early childhood and primary years children acquire English through songs, games, rhymes, play and, eventually, content. The mother tongue (when the teacher knows it) can be, and frequently is, used in the very beginning to help children feel happy and secure. Is this on its own an adequate exposure in the early years?

A solution

Where an international school has a group of twenty or more host-country children (or indeed a large group from any other language background) should the school not provide lessons in that particular language, especially in the early years? Children as young as two and a half or three have not yet fully acquired their own language and research tells us that children who have developed their first language have an easier time learning successive languages; and occasionally those deprived of a fully-developed first language can experience cognitive difficulties later on. Should we not then provide for these children a bilingual environment in their early years and gradually wean them off their mother tongue and on to English if necessary?

At a recent ESL conference in Vienna, Dr Else Haymayan spoke on the importance of promoting additive bilingualism, and by so doing, promoting biculturalism. Biculturalism is a near-native knowledge of two languages and includes the ability to respond effectively to the different demands of the two cultures. The keynote speaker, David Graddol, said it was the duty of all teachers in international schools to support the development of their students' mother tongues. The ESL teachers at the conference agreed overwhelmingly that it was time to raise awareness of this issue and that the ESL committee should request that its name be changed to ESL and Mother Tongue committee.

Administrators and teachers in international schools have, I think, begun to realize that the annual 'international food' event is not enough. We have to find ways of promoting languages (at least two) throughout the day, every day. A few schools have bilingual programmes for their younger children and a mother tongue programme in primary and secondary, but not by any means most schools.

The presence of very small children from host country language backgrounds in English-language international schools is a phenomenon that international schools have a moral and professional obligation to deal with in a way that will give the greatest benefit to the child while avoiding the ill effects that can come from not having a fully-developed mother tongue.

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