



Teaching Support video script: A multilingual approach

To support multilingual learners in your setting you should consider the following three areas:

- Developing your own multilingual mindset.
- Supporting learning of key vocabulary.
- How to evaluate achievements in communication and language.

Developing your own multilingual mindset

All practitioners need a multilingual mindset. This does not necessarily mean speaking different languages yourself but seeing multilingual children as capable in their home languages and dialects, and recognising for each child has different experiences of language. For example, some languages have long histories of being written down and children will be able to draw on traditional written literature and poetry. Other languages and dialects are oral and have rich storytelling and singing traditions.

A multilingual mindset involves accepting that, because each child's experiences are different, they are developing their school language in their own unique way and will need different support from you.

One of the most effective ways to develop talk and clear, coherent speech is to concentrate on the flow of communication rather than correcting mistakes. A multilingual mindset includes seeing children's grammatical mistakes in the school language as revealing useful information about how their home language is influencing their misunderstandings. This will help you to identify next steps for learning.

Starting school can be a stressful experience. At the same time as learning curriculum content, children are learning to interact with unfamiliar people in a new social setting and to accept new values and expectations. Additionally, for many multilingual children, this new learning is taking place at the same time as learning the school language. Being able to discuss new concepts in their home language and relate prior experiences to new words in the school language has a positive impact on children's learning.

Some multilingual children may be able to do some tasks in the school language but others may not, and many will struggle in understanding your instructions. If children do not respond in an appropriate way, it is not a sign of being a slow learner. Often multilingual children will respond non-verbally, using facial expressions, sounds, actions, body language and a sense of humour – or they will use objects to express their ideas.

Repeating verbally what the child had expressed non-verbally is a powerful strategy for learning. A multilingual mindset includes embedding home languages into everyday routines and practices. This has benefits for all children, not just multilingual learners, and can include:

- Enabling children to use their home language to express their needs and wants. For example, by learning some key phrases yourself.
- Bilingual team teaching - teaching in two languages.
- Using dual language books, where two languages and scripts tell the same story.
- Display home language translations of keywords and phrases alongside school language versions to support children.

- As a practitioner, you need patience and a repeating cycle of observation, evaluation and reflection to plan activities that ensure progression for multilingual learners. It can be tempting to prioritise literacy (reading and writing) over speaking and listening, and over activities for other curriculum areas. However, you should remember that speaking and listening are crucial foundations for literacy and children's overall development depends on a broad curriculum. Instead, ensure that you have high expectations for spoken language across all curriculum areas. For example, by talking about craft activities using a rich vocabulary rather than just focusing on key terminology.

When considering inclusivity for multilingual learners, ask yourself these questions:

- How can I provide additional support for children who do not yet speak or understand the school language well?
- How can I embed multilingual learning experiences in daily routines, everyday practice and interactions with children?
- Which broader practices in my school may affect multilingual children?
- How can I help all of our staff to promote inclusive practices for multilingual learners?

Silent, or non-verbal period

Many children go through a silent or non-verbal period when they first start school with a new school language. As a practitioner, you may feel that you have failed if, after some time, a child is still not responding to you verbally, or speaking to other children. However, if the child is speaking appropriately at home, you should respect the child's preferred approach to starting school.

During the non-verbal period, children will listen intently and begin to internalise new ways of speaking. They will listen for words, formulaic phrases and intonation patterns and may rehearse these by humming or whispering. This is an important period of learning. If you observe them closely, you will see that they communicate plenty through their gaze, smiles, body language and play preferences. They are likely to welcome your interactions with them and to appreciate you drawing them into new activities with other children, even if they want to stay silent.

Singing is often an effective way of encouraging children to participate verbally. The collective act of singing, with everyone's voices creating one big voice is a safe and enjoyable way of developing confidence. No child should be made to feel bad because they prefer to stay silent at first in an early years setting. Children will learn best in stress free environments and through playful but meaningful social interactions with you and with other children. Once they feel ready to talk, their progress is likely to be fast.

Supporting learning of key terminology

In each curriculum area, there is specific terminology that relates to key concepts. For example, 'more' and 'fewer' in mathematics. Most children understand the concepts of 'more' and 'fewer' from an early age. Just imagine a young child being asked to choose from two groups of sweets where one group contains more than the other. However, the terminology may be new to them. Similarly, children may relatively easily recognise 'soft' and 'loud' sounds and the differences between 'old' and 'new' clothes but they may not yet have the vocabulary to describe the differences in the school language.

Sometimes, both a concept and its word may be new to children. You will need to assess whether it is the concept that is new, the word, or both. One way of doing this is to accept children's other strategies for telling you what they know about the concept. For example, you putting their hands on their ears for loud music or singing, which you can easily compliment by modelling the use of keywords 'loud' and 'strong'.

Translating some keywords into children's home languages and displaying them around your setting is a helpful strategy. Working with families or community elders to translate these keywords can help forge valuable links with families and communities.

How to evaluate achievements in communication and language

It is important to remember that although the curriculum is designed for all children, each child is an individual and some more subjective elements of learning statements may relate to multilingual children differently. For example, responding 'appropriately' or giving 'relevant' information. You and other practitioners should discuss how subjective terms should be interpreted for different children. Otherwise, there is a danger that practitioners will lower their expectations of children who are not yet fluent in the school language. For example, a five-year-old child, who is not yet speaking much in the school language and relies on one-word answers to most questions is still functioning at a very different cognitive level from a two-year-old child who responds with one-word answers. A poorly considered assessment might incorrectly suggest that the five-year-old child's language use is not 'appropriate' and could lead to the practitioner planning activities that are more suitable for a younger child. Instead, in order to develop the five-year-old child's language and ensure that they are that they remain motivated, the child still needs age-appropriate cognitive challenges, such as problem-solving activities.

Your assessment of each child requires sensitivity and an acceptance of all of the child's communication strategies, such as a mixture of non-verbal communication and some one-word responses. You should also evaluate how much each child's school language has developed overtime, and whether their individual progress seems appropriate.

It is also important to be sensitive to different social and cultural backgrounds when evaluating against subjective elements of learning statements. For example, silence can indicate respect in one group and disrespect in another. Similarly, 'simple questions' or 'everyday language' depend upon children's prior learning and their familiarity with the topic, and 'everyday' lives are not uniform.

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