

The importance of home languages

It is important to keep using home languages both in the Early Years Foundation Stage setting and at home. “Bilingualism is an asset and the first or home language has a continuing and significant role in identity, learning and the acquisition of additional languages.” “Children need to develop strong foundations in the language that is dominant in the home, where most children spend most of their time. Home language skills are transferable to new languages and strengthen children’s understanding of language use.”

“Developing and maintaining a home language as the foundation for knowledge about language will support the development of English and should be encouraged, Insistence on an English-only approach to language learning in the home is likely to result in a fragmented development where the child is denied the opportunity to develop proficiency in either language.

The best outcome is for children and their families to have the opportunity to become truly bilingual with all the advantages this can bring.”

1. Home languages make the curriculum more accessible for pupils new to English

Newly arrived pupils may initially have very little knowledge of English language and encouraging them to use their home language may be a very useful strategy for ensuring that they participate in some way in school activities. Older pupils may have literacy skills in their home language and can therefore use it for writing, whilst they develop English Literacy skills, or they can read a book at an appropriate level in their home language in a quiet reading session for example.

2. What is learned in one language is easily transferred to another language

If pupils have previous educational experience then they may already have been taught about topics being covered at school. Even without previous educational experiences some concepts will be familiar to them. If pupils with EAL already understand a particular curriculum concept, they may simply need to transfer the understanding into the new language. Being able to express knowledge in their home language, even if it is just telling someone else the name of an object or concept, will help to give pupils a ‘hook’ on which to attach the new English word.

3. Supporting children’s home language enhances their cognitive and language development

Research shows that bilingual or multilingual pupils perform better than their monolingual peers, so encouraging the continuation of home language use for EAL pupils will support their academic achievement.

4. Time spent on the home language will not damage the development of proficiency in English

Pupils will not be delayed in their English language development if they are encouraged to use their home language. Research shows that continuing to use home languages alongside their new language acquisition will make the process of learning English faster and easier.

5. There is a positive effect on learner's identity, self – concept and self-esteem which increases their chances of successful learning

If home languages are valued and celebrated within the school environment then this sends a powerful message to pupils about their identity. If they feel that their previous experiences of life and learning are not valued within school then this will only hinder their language acquisition. Valuing pupils' home languages will increase their chances of successful learning.

6. Children need to hear their parents or carers speaking their home language

Children will gain a much richer experience of language from a parent or carer speaking their home language than if they are hearing an adult tentatively trying to use English. Parents should be encouraged to keep using the language which is most natural to them with their children.

7. Encouraging use of home languages will be a positive experience for other pupils.

Children generally find language learning easier than adults and opportunities to learn some of another pupil's home language will be a positive experience for all. It will enhance their understanding of how languages function and begin to equip them with a new and valuable skill, in addition to helping them to empathise with the new arrival in their classroom.