

Eleanor Johnson and **Angela Sterling** explain why broadening children's horizons beyond their native tongues can support their development across the EYFS...



first steps to foreign languages



There's never a wrong time to learn a language; it's never too late and it's certainly never too early. In fact, there are distinct advantages to early language learning. Children often seem to pick up new words and phrases effortlessly, in the same way they learn their native tongue. Their minds are capable of absorbing this new information, allowing them to quickly begin using a new language with ease and confidence.

Young children can benefit from learning a second language in many ways, too. If you start them on this path early then you're laying down solid foundations to build on as they progress through school. Research has shown that learning a new language may contribute to the development of the brain, particularly in the areas of memory, speech and sensory processing, and it can also contribute to a child's self-esteem – even being able to use some simple words and phrases can give children a real sense of

achievement. Alongside this, children will be developing vital listening skills, which will support speech and language development.

But how can we encourage and help along this language learning, particularly if we aren't very confident about teaching languages ourselves? In this article we will explore how you can create a sound-rich environment so that the children you work with firstly listen and then begin to use the new languages they hear through simple, everyday activities.

Songs and singing

Singing is invaluable for promoting early literacy skills and this is also true of language learning. Keep the following in mind if you'd like to try it with your children:

- Choose songs which aren't too 'busy' with lots of electronic sounds. We want our youngsters to be able to really hear the target language.
- Familiar songs translated into another language provide a very good starting point for children and adults.
- Try to choose songs with actions. Mixing sound with kinaesthetic tasks helps children to pinpoint and learn specific vocabulary.
- With longer, more complicated songs without actions, try using props to involve children in a task linked to the music.
- Build up positive associations with the language by singing, dancing to songs and generally having fun!

Case study

Catchgate Primary School in Co. Durham teaches French as a whole school. In the nursery, the children are introduced to French via simple songs, phrases and words. The practitioners make this language learning relevant by linking it to a topic or theme. This helps the children's understanding and puts the new language into context.

Get started

YOU'LL FIND EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO INTRODUCE YOUR CHILDREN TO ANOTHER LANGUAGE AT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES...

Resources

Lingotot.com – early years language resources
Storyphones.co.uk – children's MP3-players
Redrobinbooks.com – stories in English and French
Little-linguist.co.uk – a good range of MFL resources

Free downloads

Earlylearninghq.org.uk – labels and posters in different languages
Mamalisa.com – children's songs in many languages

More information

Primarylanguages.org.uk
BBC.co.uk/cbeebies/lingo-show

The practitioners feel that it's important for their children to be aware of the fact that people speak different languages. They've also noticed that learning a new language gives children good opportunities to practise their listening skills.

Books and audio stories

Books and audio stories provide a simple way to introduce new vocabulary and phrases to children in a familiar context.

- Give children opportunities to listen to a favourite story in a different language.
- Children will learn a lot from the expressions and voice on a recording, which can be as captivating as the story itself.
- Children can learn new vocabulary by joining in with the repetitive parts of a story.
- Stories set in other countries will introduce children to different societies and cultures.
- Substitute words from a different language when sharing a story, for example, the names of food in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

Technology and ICT

Making use of technology and the Internet can provide a good starting point for practitioners who aren't sure of their own language skills:

- *The Lingo Show* from CBeebies introduces languages to young children and is available to watch online.
- Some resources have videos as well as audio tracks, providing a 'virtual teacher'.
- Children love watching themselves on screen or listening to their own voice. Make a video or audio recording of a singing performance and share it with your setting and parents.
- MP3-players are a very useful tool, allowing you to create a play-list of tracks that are specific to the target language or the planned activity.

Organising your environment

There are so many opportunities to make language learning part of your child's everyday experience and audio environment. You can reinforce this by using a multisensory approach, for example, tasting foods and learning the food's name in a new language:

- Try and make language learning part of your regular routine; even a few minutes every day can have a big effect.
- Use regular phrases, greetings and routines to introduce and practise a new language, for example, 'tidy up' or 'snack time'.
- Create a 'language corner' with posters, puppets, books and MP3-players loaded with songs and stories in the new language. Children can be encouraged to make the puppets speak in the chosen language.
- Organise a themed day focusing on



about the authors

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one country using language, music, songs and food.

- Make labels and signs with your children in the target language and place these around your setting.
- Use different languages when playing games, for example, when playing hide and seek, count to 10 in your target language.

Case study

Children at Larkhill Nursery in Stockport are learning to speak French. When several French-speaking children attended the nursery, a few simple words and phrases allowed everyone to speak a little French together and gave the bilingual children more confidence. The practitioners have noticed that the language learning activities have contributed to children's confidence and self-esteem. The children enjoy using the new language they're learning and like showing their parents how they can use a different language too. The practitioners have observed that this is also helping the children to gain an understanding of communication skills in their own language.

TIP

Young children are quick to pick up accents, pronunciation and the sounds of a new language, so it's important for practitioners to have access to good quality audio language resources.