



How to...

EAL in Early Years

WRITTEN BY

**Lenka
Melova**



Hola!



Hello!

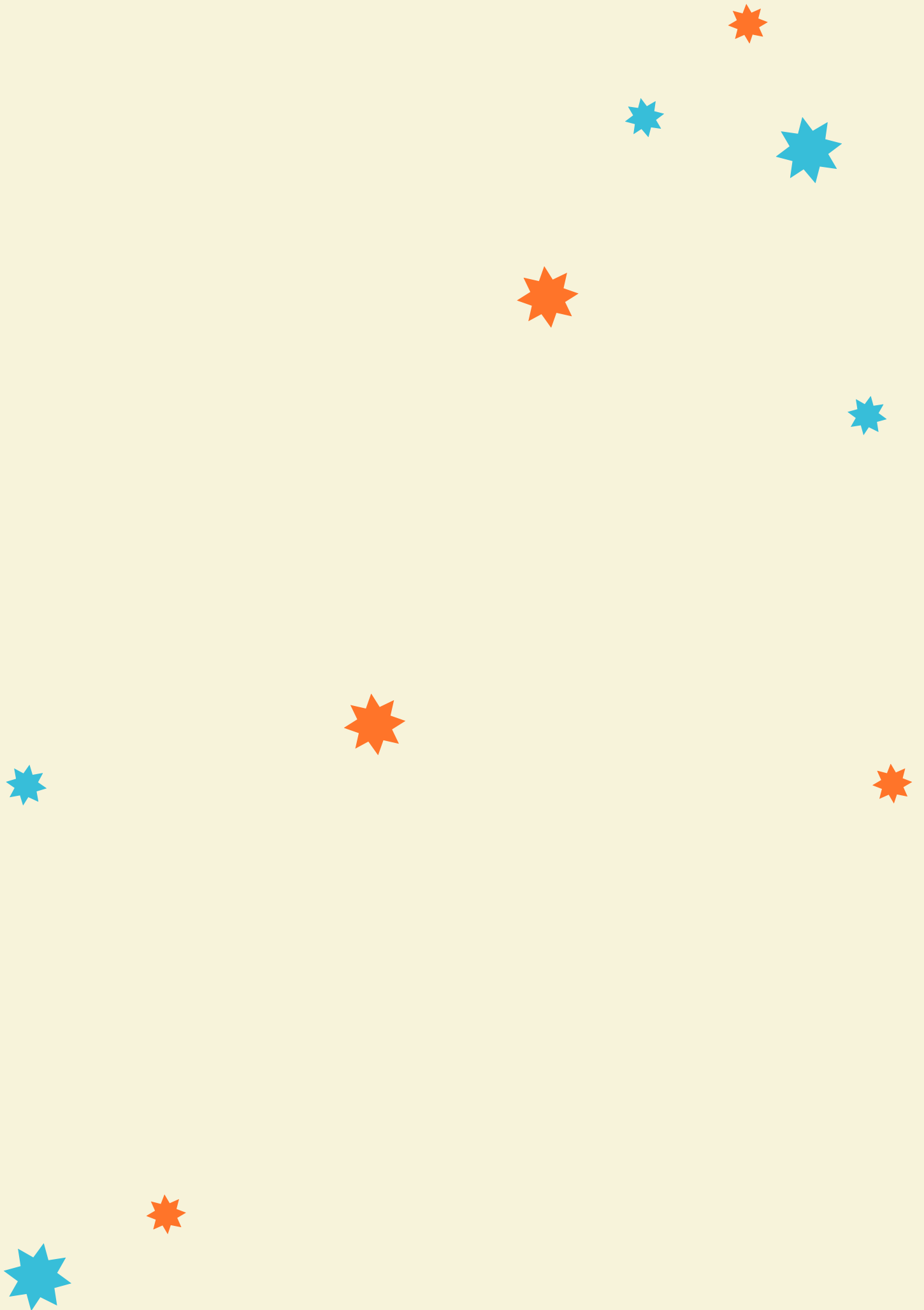


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Effective Methods and Inclusive Strategies for Integrating EAL Learners in Early Years

As an educator, how confident are you at supporting children who can't speak English? Do you wonder what resources to buy or what to do to help the child settle without having a language in common?

I have met many educators asking me some of these questions and I have been fascinated by this topic ever since I started working with children 20 years ago.

I moved to England from Slovakia and English is my second language, so I could always relate to children who start in education speaking English as an additional language or as I call them EAL Learners.

Let's answer some of these big questions and hopefully, it will give you the confidence you are looking for, because believe it or not, you are probably doing most of the strategies that support EAL children without even realising it!

Welcoming International Families into our settings

To achieve that welcoming feeling and creating a sense of belonging for new families is a priority for all of us working in the Early Years. This journey starts from the first point of contact whether it's a phone call, email or the family walks through the door. And this process continues throughout the whole time the family is part of your community.



Walking in...

Try and look around your space with a fresh pair of eyes examining what you see, hear, smell, and how it makes you feel. Can you make the space more airy and light? Is your ethos, love for nature, awe, and wonder evident? Do you have relevant information displayed or are the walls cluttered with an overwhelming amount of posters, information letters, warnings, notices, that make your brain go all fuzzy? Consider what this information overload must be like for someone who speaks English as an additional language. Is there a space where families can explore or maybe share a story?



Communication

Usually, when a family visits our place for the first time, we give out a lot of information to the new family. It is important to remember that it is not only the child who is facing a language barrier but also the parents. Be mindful, when passing on important information to parents as it can be too challenging for them if their English is not very good, yet. I also speak English as an additional language and I used to find myself smiling and nodding when talking to unfamiliar people as I was too shy to ask questions and admit I didn't understand. Therefore, it is always helpful to give the information in the written form as well, allowing the family to read it at home and use a dictionary if needed or simply ask the next day.

Induction

This is the crucial time for building a strong parental partnership – learn about the family, their circumstances, background, language, and vital information about their child that will help you tailor the best settling process for the child's needs. Ask about a child's communication skills in their language. It is useful to note some key keywords, ensure you write them down phonetically. You can discuss important festivals and make a note of the dates. Whilst talking to parents about their child, ensure you allow sufficient time for parents to answer. Remember, they are translating everything you say into their language, then they figure out the answer in their language, translate it to English, so in the end, they can give you the answer. This process can take a while, so do not rush and don't be afraid of very long pauses. I also noticed that when people are trying to help me understand what they're saying, they start talking very loud, which I find hilarious. Remember, we are not deaf, we just need you to talk slowly using simple short sentences 😊

Settling In...

If the child has no English or very limited vocabulary, it is always helpful to have a bank of keywords from parents to help the child throughout the day. I also use talking pegs and talking postcards, where you can record a parent saying messages in the child's native language. These can be very reassuring for children and they can easily operate them.

You can also use talking photo books where every page can record a message. These are lovely to make with families. You can take pictures of grownups working in the classroom with the child, pictures of play areas for the family to take home and look at. The family can create their family book with photos and record messages in their language as well as English and the child can keep it in the nursery to show you or to look at any time.



Resources provided by TTS – talking photo albums, talking pegs, and talking postcards

Routine is very important for children's well-being and allows them to sail through settling in process smoothly when provided in the right way.

Any child who is in a new environment feels anxious as they do not know what is going on and what might come next. Also, there are unfamiliar people around who are saying things that don't make any sense.

A structured daily routine will provide children with the safety net and allow them to quickly learn what will happen next. Soon they will start to link language to different parts of the routine, especially phrases that educators repeat often, such as 'wash hands' before mealtimes or 'get your coat' before going outside. To help the children adjust to the routine quickly you can introduce a simple 'Now & Next' visual timetable and use it throughout the day. This will reassure children greatly.

Mealtimes



To allow children to be independent and find their place at the table, it is helpful to use 'placemats'. These are simple laminated slips with the child's picture and their name. These can also be colour-coded to highlight their dietary requirements. Also, don't forget that different cultures have different customs. Not everyone uses cutlery, some use their hands, and some might use chopsticks. Some families don't sit at the table when eating, some sit on the floor.

Personal Hygiene

It is very helpful for children to have visual cues displayed in different areas that are used alongside verbal communication from educators. A good idea is to take photos of the process of washing hands and have these displayed above the sink, so children can see and demonstrate what is expected of them. Again, this will add another cue for learning vocabulary and at the same time allow independence.

Also, be sensitive when parents are reluctant for their children to be changed by male members of staff. Take the opportunity to gently educate parents about equality and safeguarding.



Sleep time

EAL Learners often get more tired than their peers. This is due to their brains using 2 language systems at the same time. You might find them zoned out during the day just sitting and watching. This is when they recharge, so you don't need to worry. Younger children, however, might need a nap throughout the day. It is nice to have cosy quiet areas in the room available throughout the day to allow children to independently access these and have a quiet time or even fall asleep. Don't forget to check with parents if there is a comforter which the child normally uses for sleep or what their preferred position to sleep is.



Providing small cosy corners and areas for children to escape hectic spaces are vital for their well-being as it allows them to recharge. Soft furnishings, blankets, fidget toys, fairy lights and even noise canceling ear defenders can make a huge difference to a child.



Enhancements to Practice and Provision to engage EAL Children in Learning

I am sure this can be very overwhelming for us as we want to ensure that we get it right for the children from the start. But what can we do when the child is preverbal and they don't seem to understand or interact with others?

Interaction with adults

When communicating with EAL children it is important not to overwhelm them with too many words and long sentences. Instead, keep it simple and short. A child that does not understand what you are saying, tends to intently watch your facial expressions and gestures to look for cues. You will help them significantly by using actions as well as words. For example, you can point to the bathroom and motion hand washing when you tell them 'go wash your hands'. This will become a natural habit and will not only help EAL Learners but all the children who are experiencing developmental delays.

Interaction with peers

You might have noticed that EAL children tend to avoid communication-reliant activities such as story time or group discussions. However, this does not mean they don't engage in play with their peers where they have many opportunities to develop language. They especially flourish outdoors where the interactions are more physical, such as chasing each other, copying others' play, cooperating when filling a bucket of sand, kicking a ball, etc.



Outdoors is often the most comfortable environment for children with communication delays as they can interact using physical movement.

Language support plays a significant role in children's learning and their development, and it is very important to think about the delivery of learning opportunities and how to adjust them for EAL Learners

Silent Period

It is very common for EAL Learners to go through a silent period. That doesn't mean they are not developing their communication skills. They are listening to everything being said around them, linking the meaning of the words to the cues or the context of the situation, and gaining understanding. Once they build a basic vocabulary, they will start building the confidence to say some of the words. Be patient and give children sufficient time to do so. This period can last up to 6 months, but you should be able to hear some single words before that. Also, it is important to check with parents if children display any communication skills at home in their language.

The fact that children enter your setting with no language, doesn't necessarily mean they do not have any communication or Literacy skills. Depending on their age, they might already possess a set of sounds and the ability to blend sounds, intonation awareness, a script of the alphabet depending on their home language, a set of sound-symbol relationships, vocabulary and grammar, non-verbal signals. This is why we should also advise parents to continue to use their home language. If parents suddenly change how they communicate, this can potentially add more stress to their child who is already having to adjust to the new environment and nursery life.

Repetition

Children build up their vocabulary with words and phrases they hear most often. To help them do this, ensure children can see your lips, so try to be at their level when you talk to them. It is useful to develop self-talk of sorts. This allows children to link the language to your actions. For example, you can say 'Roll, roll, roll the dough' when using a roller with dough. Lots of repetition is your best friend when helping children widen their vocabulary.



Sensory and hands-on activities are very attractive for EAL children as these are appealing to their senses and it is easy for them to engage in discovery. It also gives teachers a great opportunity to sensitively allow children to lead their play and model language by labelling children's actions or objects of interest with simple language.

Time

It takes time for children to use verbal communication and a lot is going on in their minds before they can answer a question. They might be translating what you asked, finding the answer, locating the English word, and then finding the confidence to say the answer. Therefore, it is crucial that you allow sufficient time for their answer because if you answer for them trying to help, you will just waste all the effort they have put in to engage with you in conversation. Also, when children make a mistake, don't draw attention to it by correcting them, but rather repeat what they said correctly.

Story Time

You might find EAL Learners or children with speech delays can lose focus quite quickly or might even become disruptive during story times. To engage these children, simply make this more interactive. I am quite animated when reading and change my voice for different characters and act out what is happening in the story.



The scope of possibilities is endless. Enhance your stories with props, puppets, real objects as these will provide references for children to understand the story better.

I often use puppets for children to help me narrate stories we have read many times and they are familiar with. I also mix in more simple books aimed at younger age groups that have more illustrations and very little language. Children love to be a part of storytelling and it is lots more fun for everyone. Story bags are a fantastic resource, too. You can purchase them or just make your own using the resources you already have! Make bag collections of objects that begin with the same initial sound.



Bilingual books are available in the classroom, but also for parents to borrow.

A selection of stories with repetitive refrains, lots of illustrations and less language on offer



Planning for new vocabulary should be a conscious part of daily routine involving parents as well as the setting.

Research has shown that children who gained good communication skills during their early years perform better at school. We as teachers have the power to influence the lives of children and we want to get it right. We all know that children are like sponges taking in everything that happens around them. They explore and learn about the world through observation, listening, tasting, smelling, and feeling. And this is something we need to keep in mind when trying to introduce children to new vocabulary.



Hands-on experiences that are based on children's interests are the greatest teachable opportunities as children are engrossed in what they are doing and can easily link the language they hear to actions or objects they are using at that moment.

Initially, children learn about the object trying to find as much information about it as possible. That is why we see babies looking at new objects with interest, trying to touch them and put them in their mouth, bang them on the floor to hear what it sounds like, or drop it again and again. This is when the adult role comes in – naming the object and demonstrating what it's for, usually followed by what we are not allowed to do with it. That first stage of hands-on exploration is extremely important because it is the foundation of the concept that the child will link the word to. Without it, it's just an abstract set of sounds.



As children started to notice a lot of flowers in bloom when out and about we have brought some in for painting activity.

It sparked a lovely conversation amongst the children while they were painting. They shared their knowledge about what type of flowers they are, warning each other that 'roses can be prickly, but they smell lovely when in bloom'. They have picked these words from teachers while on the walk and they were able to use them independently.

As children get older they learn a variety of different words such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions. Therefore, we have to make a conscious effort when planning activities and think about what words are children already familiar with around the particular topic and what words we want to introduce them to.



The Tiger Who Came to Tea

Teachers extended on a favourite story and had a Tea Party with the children, who made their sandwiches, discussing which ones are their favourite, naming different flavours and fillings.

Teachers used a lot of verbs such as taste, pour, spread, chop and cut and introduced description words/adjectives such as sweet and savoury.

Children also smelled and tasted different flavoured tea such as mint, strawberry, apple, and cinnamon.

This experience deeply involved all the children, they used all their senses and it enabled them to pick the new vocabulary easily.

A great way to introduce children to new verbs is action songs, but teachers can easily introduce new verbs by labelling children's actions throughout the day. The development of describing words is easily achieved with sensory activities, where both children and teachers can comment on what they see, hear, feel, smell or taste. Prepositions can be introduced during simple construction, modelling, playing hide and seek, or even obstacle course.



It is important to ensure the adults around the child share the information about newly introduced language to embed it effectively. Think about how you share information about language development as a team and with your families.

A simple display where teachers can quickly add new words they have introduced throughout the day can easily achieve effective information sharing.

It can be a great learning curve for parents themselves as they can discover how brave they can be with long or more complex words. Or they can even learn new words themselves, especially if English is not their first language.

Children's current interest around the hospital and the words they were introduced to. This was shared amongst the team of teachers working in the class allowing everyone to emphasize these new words when interacting with the children.

The environment acts as the third teacher and if you get it right, it can provide a lot of support to children with language difficulties.

I always make sure that children and families feel a sense of belonging in our space - displays showcase children's photos engaged in play and their work. This creates great points of discussion between me, parents, and children. I love seeing children pulling their parents by hand over to a display to proudly show what they have done. Whether they speak their native language or English, I can see them using their communication skills to express their feelings and thoughts.



It is useful to take a step back and get on your knees to see what children see when in your setting. To get the environment right for EAL children, you have to be very mindful of background noise. Is the music played unnecessarily? Are there distractions during story time, such as teachers talking in the background? Does your environment offer little nooks and crannies where children can get away from the loud areas? Considering these can make a huge difference to children's well-being.



Children also have their names and photos on their personal items and drawers. The resources freely accessible to children are clearly labelled, too. Sometimes I leave some resources out of reach on purpose to create a communication opportunity for children to ask what they would like.

Celebrating Diversity and making the most of the great learning opportunities that International Families bring into your settings

A long time ago, I worked at a nursery that was predominantly attended by white British families and diversity wasn't really on their radar. One day I spotted the flag of Slovakia, my home country, on the bunting that was hanging at the nursery to celebrate the Olympics and I will never forget how I felt. I was pointing the flag out to my colleagues excitedly. From that day I became focused on how Early Years approach diversity and what is really happening in the sector as migration was rapidly increasing and settings were suddenly facing families from all over the world in much greater numbers.



Nowadays, settings celebrate festivals representing different religions or backgrounds like Lunar New Year, Diwali, Christmas, Ramadan, and other events. They offer vegetarian, halal, pescatarian menus to cater for different diets and preferences. And you can also find different language books in reading areas or resources, such as dressing up or musical instruments representing different backgrounds in play areas.



Displaying and using real objects reflecting the backgrounds of families attending your settings can enrich the learning experience you provide your children with.

However, I started to think how meaningful it was for my preschool children to colour in a dragon to celebrate a Lunar New Year. I was convinced we can do better than that. And so next year instead of colouring in, we went to visit a Chinese Supermarket with the children, where they saw all the different decorations and items displayed. We looked at the writing and signs that were completely new to the children. We bought food to take back with us and had a tasting session. For dinner, we had noodles and tried to eat with chopsticks, which was great fun, and at the same time, it was fascinating to watch one of our 3-year-olds from China skilfully using these. We watched a dragon dance and made our own dragon, played the music, and danced around the room decorated with lanterns. The highlight was when one of our Chinese families agreed to join us and they taught us to sing 'Twinkle, twinkle little star' in Chinese. Later, they told me how grateful they are as it made them feel welcomed and they appreciated how much effort we put into recognising their culture and traditions.

This experience helped me approach diversity on a completely different level ensuring that everything we do to celebrate our diverse community is meaningful for our children and their families. It taught me that displaying different flags, world maps, and posters with 'Hello' in different languages is nice, but actually learning about different cultures and traditions with the children and involving families representing those cultures is so much more meaningful and rewarding.

Parents as Partners

We all know that to achieve the best results we need to make our best effort to build positive parental partnerships. Extending the learning we offer in the nursery to children's homes is the best way to support them to achieve their full potential. We can only do this when the parents are on board. Offer them information, resources, and advice and most importantly make them feel included. You will be surprised how many magical moments you'll be able to experience. And the families who came from abroad will be ever so thankful for making them a part of the community.



Library with bilingual books and also classic English stories that parents can borrow and read with children at home. It promotes the importance of reading to parents and at the same time helps to strengthen the parental partnership that is so important for connecting the learning between children's home and your settings.

Reading Areas for Children with different levels of communication

Story time can be a daunting task for children with communication difficulties and those who speak English as an additional language. Let's have a look at how to build a reading area that is welcoming for all children.

It is essential to consider the physical environment and the pedagogy – teaching and extending children's skills. To develop a child's language skills, the educator should only use slightly more complex language than the child's. Consider children's use of *expressive language* (spoken language) and their *receptive language skills* (ability to listen and understand spoken language):

Are children preverbal, using single words, or starting to join two words together?

Children using single words are typically 18 – 24 months, but for children speaking English as a second language, this is not related to their age. At this stage, children benefit from books that contain simple sentences with lots of illustrations to link vocabulary with what they see. Don't be afraid to use books that are usually aimed at younger children, e.g. picture dictionaries, books with flaps, textured books, etc. These are great for children to access on their own or read with an adult.



A lot of books in your collection can be easily enhanced by handmade props or recycled items instead of investing in expensive story bags.



When it comes to the physical environment, consider offering children a respite from the faster pace of the wider classroom. A cosy space with soft furnishings is always welcoming and attractive for the children.

Choose books that children might be interested in and rotate them regularly to introduce children to new ones. The greatest stories are the ones that children can relate to, create your own using children's photos. Children will love pointing to themselves or recognising friends and family.

Other resources I love to add for preverbal children are mirrors. They are a fantastic tool for sound games where children will engage with you making funny sounds. Children can see your lips moving and can copy sounds. This supports sound blending development and is especially effective for children who might find some sounds challenging.



Have children started to use simple three-word sentences?

Children using three-word sentences are typically between 24 – 30 months, beginning to build sentences with verbs. Again, remember this is not the same for the EAL learners. It is crucial during this period that we introduce action words (verbs), emphasizing these actions when reading to children by pointing out the action on the picture, or even better, by demonstrating it yourself or with the help of more confident children. Puppets are a fantastic tool to make the storyline more animated, exciting, and easily understandable because they can link your words to what they see and understand what's occurring in the story. That's why it would be useful to have a collection of finger puppets or even have a shelf for a single book you are focusing on with props, so children can independently re-enact the story. For example, you can have three bowls and spoons for the Goldilocks story.



Repetition is also essential to build on children's confidence. Once children familiarise themselves with the storyline, it is helpful to let the children finish the sentences or pause to fill in the missing word. Stories with repetitive phrases or reading the same story repeatedly throughout the week is a great help.

And let's not forget the importance of action songs and rhymes. A simple 'if you're happy and you know it' teaches children verbs such as clap, shake, stomp, shout, etc. Dancing can be a good form of communication for children as it is not verbally reliant and allows children to express themselves through physical actions.

All of this is indicating what other resources are beneficial to add to your reading area apart from books. Have a basket with musical instruments, because they play a crucial part in developing listening skills. Can children play a quiet sound or a very loud one? Can they copy rhythm? EAL children who might struggle to follow the storyline will be able to join this activity with ease and show their understanding skills following instructions you demonstrate, listening, and focusing.



Are children using three or more word sentences?

Children reach this level at 30 – 36 months when they start to ask simple questions. To embed these skills, you can begin to ask simple questions during your story reading. Simple questions usually start with what, who, and where, encouraging children to name or describe things they see.



Every classroom should have a permanent reading area, but I also love to see books in other areas - cookbooks in the family area, encyclopaedias and animal books in the small world play, etc. This provides opportunities to look at books during daily interactions and teach children that print and books are sources of information. I will never forget children getting a dinosaur encyclopaedia to explain to me the difference between triceratops and stegosaurus using these extremely long words with confidence.

And my absolute favourite is to see a wide range of reading materials available to children - newspapers, magazines, factual books, maps, especially if they also showcase different languages and print

Adding books to interest corners

Have children started to use more complex sentence structures?

At 36 – 42 months children begin to join phrases and use comparatives and superlatives (bigger/the biggest). At 42 – 56 months they start using a variety of connectives such as but, so, because, and then. This is a perfect time for teachers to promote retelling and predicting, problem-solving, and answering 'why' questions. By now children understand the structure of stories where there is the beginning, middle, and end.

Try asking your children: 'What do you think might happen next? How can the pigs stop the wolf coming down the chimney? Why is she sad/ scared?' The resources you might find helpful for this are picture boards, story sacks, and real objects.



Story time doesn't necessarily mean getting the book off the shelf. How often do you just tell a story without a book or teach the children a poem? Or even better - make a poem with the children. Involving children in storytelling and poetry has endless benefits for children's communication skills as well as their imagination and is a great outlet to express themselves.

Useful tip

Parents themselves are the most incredible resource to support children in developing their language. Share the books you read with the parents and encourage parents to read the story with their child at home in their language to promote positive book sharing at home.

Contact

lenka.melova@gmail.com

How to...EAL in Early Years Quiz

Please, highlight if these statements are true or false

Statements	True	False
1. Parents should start to speak English with their children at home to help them progress.		
2. Practitioners should use plenty of long sentences with EAL children who do not speak yet, to help them build up their vocabulary.		
3. EAL children get more tired than other children throughout the day.		
4. When children are new to English speaking environment, it is common for them not to speak at all in their first months.		
5. EAL children are more likely to interact with their peers in an outdoor environment.		
6. EAL children need access to books with plenty of text straight from the beginning to introduce them to new vocabulary.		
7. During settling in, practitioners should not use words in the child's home language to not confuse them.		
8. Preverbal children do not use spoken language.		
9. Two-year-olds can typically answer 'how' and 'why' questions.		
10. You must draw attention to children's mistakes and correct them.		
11. A visual timetable can help children get used to the routine		
12. In preschool children need access to quiet areas.		
13. EAL Learners and children with communication development delay may find it difficult to focus during story time.		
14. If a child copies your facial expression, but doesn't talk, it is still considered a communication.		

Name: **Date:**

Staff's signature:

Manager's signature:

