

Speaking each others' languages

With many different languages being spoken, particularly in London and other urban centres, bilingualism and even multilingualism among young children is growing. **Michela Yagoub** tells us more about the intriguing subject of language acquisition in young children

Language: it is one of the most fascinating and versatile skills humans develop in the first few early years of life. Given the right opportunities, by the time children are four or five years of age they become fully proficient in at least one language, having mastered the intriguing variety of its phonemes, the complexities of its grammatical structure, the captivating intricacies of semantics (the meaning of words) and its multifaceted pragmatic application (use of language in a social context). Even more remarkable is that very young children show the ability to apply this mammoth task to more than one language: this phenomenon is known as bi/multilingualism, the ability to understand and make oneself understood in two – or more – languages.

It is estimated that 70% of the world's population uses more than one language (Lindon, 2004, Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2006); bi/multilingualism has interested UK educators and researchers for the last 50 years, when Britain witnessed a large influx of foreigners from around the world; a recent survey revealed that there are about 300 languages spoken in London and that more than half the children in inner London schools are now thought to be EAL (English as Additional – or Alternative – Language) pupils (Institute of Education, 2011). Learning English as an additional language in an early years setting subsequent to the mother tongue having been consolidated is known as consecutive or sequential bilingualism; however, when young children learn two languages simultaneously is known as simultaneous bilingualism. Interestingly, the pattern of language acquisition for bilingual and



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monolingual children is very similar (Whitehead, 2007). In the pre-linguistic (receptive) stage there is an initial period when the baby is internalising the first language, preparing and practising its mechanism for future verbalisation. This can be likened to the silent period of sequential bilinguals when they, on being exposed to the new language, dedicate weeks or even months to its absorption and comprehension: during this period the bilingual child will initially attempt to communicate in his/her first language but then resorts to non-verbal communication. One word utterances (also known as holophrases) then begin to be used to convey complex ideas; followed by telegraphic speech, when

the child starts to combine a string of words but omits function words such as articles and auxiliary verbs; early sentences with some grammatical errors then begin to emerge followed by more competent language.

Language acquisition, a truly 'magical feat of childhood', seems to develop without any conscious effort, without any structured learning or carefully planned lessons. Living within the gripping realm of the sensitive periods – these windows of opportunity for effortless and rapid learning – and possessing a biologically pre-programmed mind, children between birth and 5 years seem to internalise one or more languages as if by osmosis: they absorb everything about them,

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simply living in an environment that is rich in verbal (and non-verbal) communication, which provides appropriate stimuli and encourages appropriate practical opportunities. The principle of the sensitive period for language is well known by Montessori practitioners, but researchers are intrigued by the hypothesis of a sensitive period for second language acquisition; although studies are not yet conclusive there seems to be a general consensus that 'the earlier the better'. Globalisation (in the more social rather than financial aspect of the term) was not yet a big part of life during Montessori's time; however, she recognised the incredible potential of the child's mind to acquire languages, a capacity that the adult's mind will eventually lose. "If a child has not been able to act according to the directives of his sensitive period, the opportunity of a natural conquest is lost, and is lost forever." (Montessori, 1967, p 40).

It is therefore the adults' (both the parents and early years practitioners) responsibility to create an environment that optimises this special time in their children's lives, a time which is filled with immeasurable potential.

The 'full immersion approach' – where English is the medium through which the majority of the setting's curriculum is delivered and is the main language of communication – attempts to replicate the unconscious manner in



understanding rather than speaking is emphasized; learning occurs in a meaningful communicative context and is organized in terms of concrete, hands-on experiences; these experiences must incorporate physical activity and are organized according to a communicative syllabus rather than a grammatical syllabus (where grammar is learnt through communication rather than through formal teaching). Therefore, linguistic experiences in the environment must: engage the bilingual child actively; always be provided within a meaningful, social context; relate to the 'here-and-now'

objects to find), CD, tapes and songs are also useful. Books are another invaluable resource but telling, rather than reading, stories may enable the practitioner to establish a closer connection with the child and adapt the language experience better to his/her individual needs.

Providing opportunities for role play or simply allowing children to spontaneously engage in play with others will enhance language use in a more natural and child-friendly social context; as most children will acquire most of their English incidentally and as children learn best from each other

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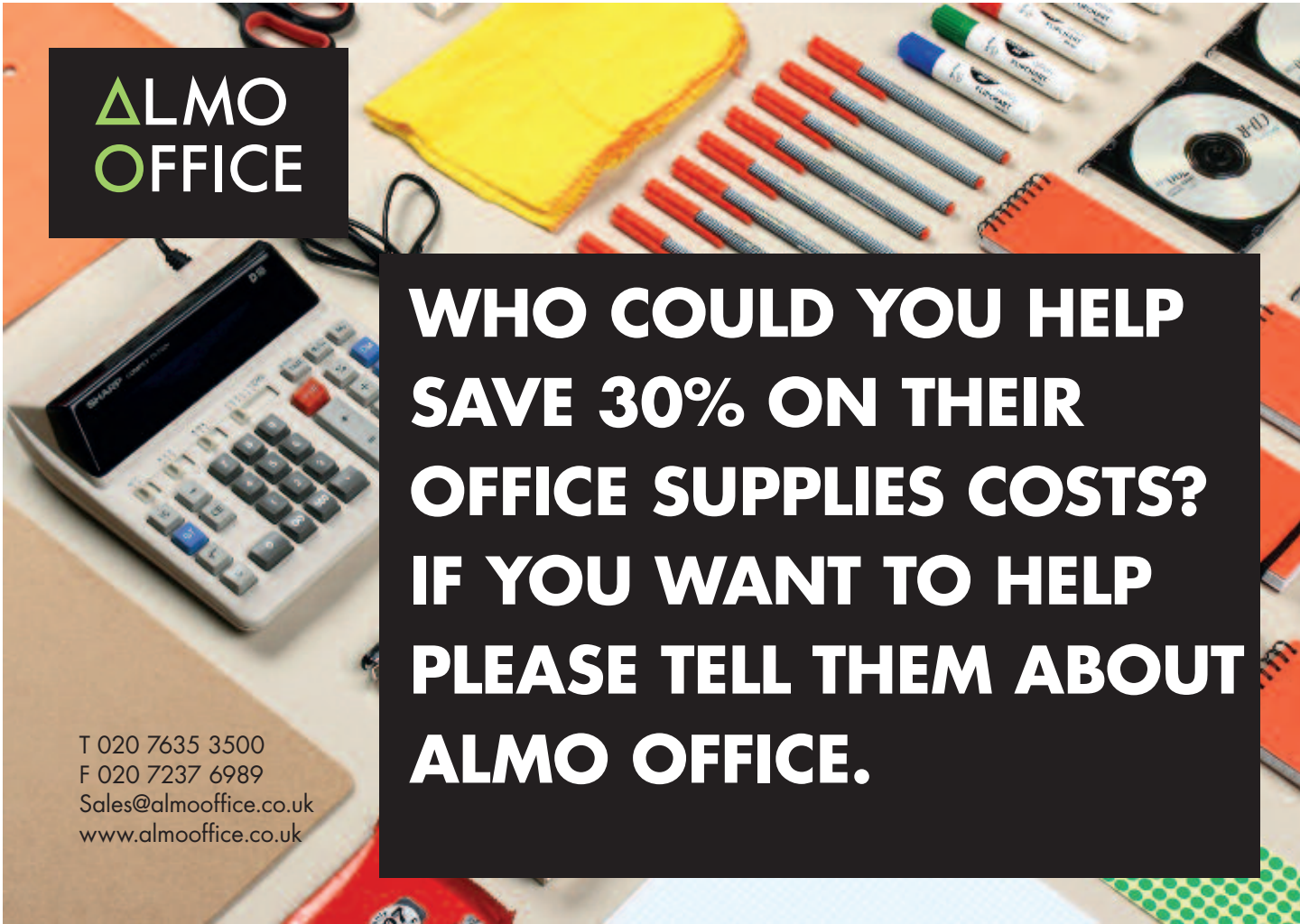
which children acquire a language. Moreover, it applies the effective principle for second language learning known as the 'one-environment-one-language approach', which enables the child's mathematical mind, fuelled by a strong need for order, to better organise and keep the logistics of the two languages separate. However, whenever possible, during the settling-in period practitioners should learn and use key words or short phrases in the child's home language, which will become crucial during emotive routines such as those around personal care.

Chowan (1997) suggest that a successful immersion program takes the following key factors into account: the child's home language is appreciated and not belittled in the setting; immersion pupils experience the same curriculum as mainstream pupils;

and be relevant to the child's daily life and interests; have the support of visual, tangible aids and must include plenty of repetition. Practitioners should give particular consideration to the quality of their language in-put: words should be pronounced in an articulate manner, correct grammar should be applied constantly and appropriate terminology used. Expanding on and recasting the child's speech are strategies that enable more complex language and accurate grammar to be modelled in a sensitive manner. 'Self-talk' (providing a running commentary on what you are doing) and 'Parallel-talk' (describing what the child is doing) could occasionally represent useful tools to further support language acquisition. Other activities, such as the 'Simon says' game (which could focus on verbs to act out or

the Montessori apparatus (such as the familiar and versatile objects of the Activities of Everyday Living area) and the vertical grouping system lend themselves well to this purpose. Other material, however, such as the Sandpaper Letters must be introduced only at a later stage when the child's mastery of English is sufficient enough to enable him/her to link the symbols to the now internalised new sounds. Interestingly, practitioners' observations have shown that bilingual children make five times more utterances outdoors than they do inside; this has obvious implications for the current debate to ensure that the potential for outdoor spaces as learning environments is maximised. (DfCSE, 2007)

Just as important as resources and speaking strategies, however, is the

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adult's interest in **listening** to what the child has to say allowing him/her suitable time to express desires and needs.

It is at this point very significant to emphasize that all the above strategies, which suggest good practice in supporting the sequential acquisition of the second language, will equally benefit the monolingual child who remains naturally eager and developmentally ready to progress towards higher linguistic competency and a wider verbal repertoire. "The principles of good practice for children learning English are the principles of good practice for **all** children." (DfCSE, 2007, p 2)

It is common practice for settings to introduce a new language such as French via pre-planned, adult-led, weekly lessons: Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (2003) refer to this program as artificial bilingualism, which occurs when specific situations are created for children to become naturally exposed to another language; indeed adults must consider how 'natural' such 'artificial' experiences are. With the support of sensitive practice that reflects the invaluable principles of the Montessori cosmic education,

monolingual children who are exposed to different cultures through different languages will also be guided towards developing a more respectful, sensitive and considerate attitude towards others and the world in general. Practitioners should endeavour to model these positive attitudes by working closely with families from different backgrounds, by valuing all languages and by showing true curiosity and interest in learning more about other cultures. Moreover, encouraging parents to continue speaking the home language with their children not only facilitates the acquisition of the second language but ensures that those important family bonds continue to grow.

It must be also remembered that children learning EAL are not a homogeneous group: each child with distinctive personal characteristics, unique abilities, individual needs and interest must remain at the heart of any educational approach. Sadly, statistics still reveal that the skills, knowledge and understanding of children learning EAL are often underestimated: it is therefore crucial to learn more about this topic in order to be better able to support children in this journey and to challenge misconceptions that seem to

be still present. It should be a privilege and a duty to find out more about language, a true achievement of the human race very much taken for granted.

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