



Young children in early childhood education and care and their path to Harmonious Bilingualism

A series by [HaBilNet](#), the Harmonious Bilingualism Network

This series considers research results about young children's bilingual language development and discusses how these results can be applied in early childhood education and care so that all children may benefit from harmonious bilingual development.

Articles in the series are adaptations of texts originally published in German in [Das Kita-Handbuch](#) (online, OA), Martin R. Textor & Antje Bostelmann (eds.), over the course of 2021.

Adaptation of article No. 3 **Mehrsprachige Literacy-Erziehung in der Kita** (Mareen Pascall & Annick De Houwer, June 2021)

[Read the original German article here.](#)

Emergent multilingual literacy in early childhood education and care

Mareen Pascall & Annick De Houwer

Scholars and educators agree it is important to offer children a wide range of experiences with literacy from early on. Joint book reading with infants stimulates both children's and parents' talk (Clemens & Kegel, 2021). Emergent literacy education in preschool is not usually focused on learning to read and write, but on creating "the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to reading and writing" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998: 848). A rich emergent literacy education ensures positive experiences with narrative culture, books, and writing. It also creates optimal conditions for stimulating young children's reading pleasure and familiarity with handling books, and it promotes skills such as linguistic abstraction ability and phonological awareness (Rohde, 2015).

This article explains why in early childhood education and care (ECEC) an emergent literacy education that includes all of children's home languages is of particular significance. It also shows how all children, including those reared with just a single language, can benefit from an emergent multilingual literacy education.

Why multilingual literacy education?

Very early in the course of learning to speak children build a close bond between language and identity. Imagine three-year-old Anna in the United States. Anna starts attending an English-speaking preschool but has solely heard Russian at home. Anna has just started to be able to make herself well understood in Russian, is able to convince others to do things for her through language, and has generally learned that there is power through language. All of a sudden, she finds herself in a setting where

her Russian language skills are worthless. Furthermore, she does not understand what is going on. Anna's newly found power through language has just evaporated.

This kind of experience is unsettling for most children who have been raised with a language that is not used at preschool: They are not able to show how much they have already learned, they soon notice that their language does not count in everyday life, and as a result they “experience themselves as worrying cases, as those who are not able to communicate 'correctly' with [...] others” (Putjata & Vishek, 2018: 36, our translation). When children encounter a total lack of interest in the language they bring to the ECEC classroom from home they may experience this disinterest as a rejection of their identity. Their language is something that apparently does not belong in day care or at preschool and that needs to be hidden. This can have negative consequences for children’s bilingual development and the relationships within their families (De Houwer, 2020).

The inclusion of all children's languages in the literacy activities in ECEC, on the other hand, promotes feelings of self-efficacy, confidence and personal worth in children who already speak one of these languages but are only just beginning to learn English. Furthermore, children who are learning both English and another language at home enjoy being able to take part in literacy activities in both their languages.

Of course, ECEC professionals do not have language skills in all the languages that children bring with them from home. They don't need to. Much more important is an appreciative, open attitude towards all the children's and their parents' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Mary & Young, 2020). For a start, such appreciation can be signaled by creating a visually diverse setting in rooms and hallways within the center or school. The various languages that children bring from home can be made visible through, for instance, multilingual welcome signs in the entrance area. Pictures of everyday objects can be posted with labels in different languages. Multilingual children's books can be prominently displayed on shelves, and much more (see further below). Even though many children will not yet be able to read, many of their parents will feel welcomed this way, and many will appreciate that their languages are made visible in the place where their children are educated outside the home. The visible presence of multiple languages will remind staff every day of the languages that children under their care are able to speak. And the monolingual English-speaking children's interest in other languages may be stimulated by seeing scripts that differ from the English one they are used to seeing in books (even if they cannot yet read).

Multilingual literacy education is worthwhile for all children

With the inclusion of different languages in the day-to-day routine in ECEC, children soon learn that English is not “superior” or “better” but that other languages are also worthwhile, interesting and beautiful. There is enormous learning potential for all children in comparing different languages. For example, they can discover the same letters in labels in different languages or explore the sound of single letters across words in different languages.

Early literacy education is indeed strongly connected with speaking. Rhyming, for instance, can help children become more aware of syllables and may foster phonological awareness, which is important for later reading and spelling success (Grofčíková & Máčajová, 2020; State Government of Victoria, 2020; Van Goch, McQueen, & Verhoeven, 2014). Speaking rhymes in different languages and trying to discover syllables will be fun learning activities for all children in the group.

Getting to know animal sounds in different languages and contrasting them with each other is another fun activity that will foster the awareness of different sounds. Through such activities, children will also become familiar with terms such as “language”,

"word", "letter" and "sound" (Putjata & Vishek, 2018). These are all terms that play a role in language awareness, which is very important for early reading and writing.

A literacy oriented climate in ECEC

It is important to create a supportive literacy oriented climate in ECEC. To do so, we recommend that staff install rituals that set the scene for supporting all languages, create a literacy-friendly room design, and make available a well-chosen selection of books and other materials. We discuss some examples below.

Cook (2018) describes a ritual as part of the morning circle that is very popular among children: Children name any four languages of the languages present in their group, and following the melody of a well-known (English) nursery rhyme they then sing the words for "Good morning" or "Hello" in each of these languages. Over time, children will know the words in the respective languages by heart. The following day children choose another set of languages, depending on what languages are present in the group. Instead of morning greetings other subjects can be included in the morning circle, such as multiple language versions of the day of the week or numbers. Rituals such as these at the beginning of the day signal to children that language diversity is normal. They open the door for children towards using all their languages as resources throughout the rest of the day.

A rich physical literacy environment in early classrooms plays a large role in learning and in offering opportunities for children to develop emergent literacy (Dyenia et al., 2018; Hofslundsengen et al., 2020). A literacy-friendly room design can be created through the use of posters with different alphabets and scripts. Many multilingual posters for ECEC settings are available commercially. Pictures of interesting objects can be hung up with labels in multiple languages that are created together with parents and children.

A good practice in many ECEC settings is to install a cozy reading corner with a mini library that is freely available to children. A book lending scheme whereby books can be loaned out, for example from Friday to Monday, offers an opportunity for introducing children from families without books at home to books. Many public libraries offer intercultural events such as multilingual readings for preschool groups. A visit to the "place where the books live" can be a particularly exciting and mysterious experience for children.

In line with Neuman and Roskos' (1992) findings for monolingual children, children's cookbooks or a selection of recipes and shopping lists in different languages can be provided in a play cooking area and will likely stimulate children to use the recipes and lists for pretend play. Recipes and lists can be assembled with the help of parents, and parents could actually come to the classroom and prepare some of the recipes, or bring some meals to share and share the particular recipe or list of ingredients. Using food from different cultures is an excellent tool for introducing all children to cultural variety. Similarly, picture books from different cultural backgrounds showing people of different skin colors, different family constellations and people in diverse living environments create opportunities for depicting cultural diversity. They also offer children from different cultural backgrounds the chance to see themselves reflected in the classroom. The diversity in the picture books does not need to be explicitly addressed, and will just become a natural part of everyday life in the classroom. Picture books without texts are also great for encouraging adult-child interaction (Petrie et al., 2021).

Multilingual picture books offer different usage options, especially if family members or volunteers can be recruited as read aloud volunteers (see below). Children can first be introduced to a new story in their stronger or more familiar language. Later they

can listen to the now already familiar story in English. Alternatively, a story can be read out simultaneously, i.e., alternating two languages per sentence or unit of meaning. If there are multilingual audio versions of a book, there are even more possible uses. For example, staff can read aloud the book in the language(s) they know and individual children can later listen to the story by themselves in their family language while looking at the book.

Handling books should indeed become a matter of course for all children, not only by looking at them but also by talking about them. Children can be encouraged to describe pictures in their home languages, thereby legitimizing children's use of home languages (Kirsch & Seele, 2020). Staff can then enable the other children to understand by describing the pictures in English, and can use that translation as a basis for expanding information about the book (Kirsch & Seele, 2020). Such expansions in turn contribute to English learning, in a context where children's other languages are actively encouraged. Another option is for any book to be freely available to children to look at the pictures and to make up stories - regardless of the language(s) in the book or among the children. Children are free to tell the story in whatever language they choose, and can invite other children to tell the story in another language of their choosing.

Another possibility for experiencing different sounds, scripts, and cultures is when parents or grandparents are invited to the ECEC setting as reading volunteers. A given book in any language can be looked at together, read out monolingually or simultaneously in two languages, or it can be accessed through dialogic reading (for a description of dialogic reading and its importance, see this article by Whitehurst in <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/dialogic-reading-effective-way-read-aloud-young-children>). All bilingual and monolingual children who wish to participate can do so.

Bilingual picture books, some of them with audio versions, can be downloaded free of charge or on a donation basis through the website of the charity [Book Pirates](#) (Bücherpiraten e.V.). The South African organization [Saide](#) also provides picture books free of charge, especially in African languages. Further information on multilingual children's literature and the multilingual design of reading offers can be found on the website of the [Association of Binational Families and Partnerships](#) (Verband binationaler Familien und Partnerschaften).

Conclusion

There are many ways to introduce young children to activities that support language awareness and the enjoyment of reading and writing. Because most ECEC settings today welcome children with a great variety of home languages, emergent literacy activities in ECEC should not only concentrate on English, but encompass all the languages that children bring with them from home. This fosters harmonious bilingual development. In addition, emergent multilingual literacy education promotes all children's well-being and increases all children's awareness of different languages and cultures. Thus, all children can benefit from emergent multilingual literacy education.

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