

Languages in EYFS/KS1

Learning a foreign language at an early age can have huge benefits.

Children seem to have an innate ability to pick up a new vocabulary quickly and this is often seen in nursery attendees whose first language is not English. Within weeks, many of them can master English words and understand what is being asked of them. Similarly, children who move to another country at a young age pick up the new language far more easily than their parents.

A young child's brain has far greater plasticity, which means new pathways can be created at an exponential rate. As we age, this amazing ability diminishes and the learning process takes more time and effort. Even babies who simply hear another language can grow these new pathways and begin to understand different language systems. This helps them to problem solve, which is an essential life skill.

Studies have shown clear structural improvements in the brains of bilingual people, as well as demonstrating that learning a second language can stimulate the growth of grey matter. Therefore, starting children off with languages from an early age can give them an enormous advantage.

Studies of children who grew up speaking two languages have shown that they are usually better at prioritising than monolingual children. They are also more able to focus on a critical task, while ignoring irrelevant information. Other research has shown that babies raised in bilingual environments develop essential decision-making and problem-solving skills long before they can even speak and that language learning can positively enhance creativity. All of this positive research points to the inherent value of learning a second language at an early age.

When a child learns a second language, they indirectly absorb the mechanics of language. This makes them better at grasping the quirks of English grammar, improves their listening skills and makes them more effective communicators.

In a multicultural society, it is very important for children to learn about other countries, cultures and traditions. Learning a foreign language can provide the perfect backdrop for exploring these things. Children find it easier to connect with other cultures which makes them more open-minded and tolerant of diversity and learning a new language encourages them to explore the world around them, rather than just see things from their own perspective.

Music is a very important part of our culture and can be particularly useful in getting to grips with a new vocabulary. It doesn't just enhance memory recall, but also helps set musical patterns that the child hears but does not yet understand. Consequently, this helps develop the child's listening skills and helps them to form language. Children are drawn into rhymes and songs. They hear and experiment with the beat of a song; they enjoy mimicking the pronunciation of new and strange words; and they play with rhyming words through repetition. By doing these things, children are listening to the sounds of the language and inadvertently working on rhythm, stress, intonation and pronunciation.

Stories are another invaluable tool for learning another language thanks to their accessibility and the sharing of common experiences. They convey human themes and topics, irrespective of the language they are written in.