Building Bilingual Elementary Programs

A field guide for school leaders,
classroom guides and second language teachers

Building Bilingual Elementary Programs

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Key takeaways

- The Bilingual Montessori Project originated with a mission **to support bilingual education** within the Montessori framework.
- **Developmental education** acknowledges that children progress at varying rates across different areas.
- **Language learning** integrated with Montessori principles fosters learner autonomy and personalised development.
- This field guide's purpose is to provide **structured guidance** for implementing holistic multilingual education.

1. General introduction to the Bilingual Montessori project

The professionals building the Bilingual Montessori Project have all forged bilingual school programs that respect student autonomy in different parts of Europe over the last 15 years. We have faced the challenges you may now face in your bilingual schools and classrooms. We have, at times, felt hopeful and delighted by plans, progress and children using a second language with pride. At other times, we have felt puzzled and frustrated by challenges, setbacks, and a lack of support and information. We have wondered whether it was really possible to offer freedom of choice to children developing literacy skills in a second language environment and, at times, even felt a little envy towards monolingual Montessori programs.

As bilinguals ourselves, we know that the ability to use more than one language requires hard work and courage, and we know that being bilingual is surprisingly transformative, opening our minds and hearts to understanding other cultures profoundly. In times of difficulty, guiding children in their second language acquisition while respecting their autonomy as learners is very complicated. At these times we can remind ourselves that we work to educate children to serve a strong global future. All of you who collaborate to create successful bilingual school programs are making a small but valuable contribution to the quest for global stability and well-being.

Seeing the growing need the decision was made to create a community where practical advice and sound knowledge can be shared. Bilingual Montessori co-founders Marikay McCabe and Mirka Vlčková purchased the domain www.bilingualmontessori.com and had the logo designed in December 2019. Our plans were stalled during the global pandemic but when we returned to our website design and our ideas of how to reach our public in the quickly evolving digital landscape, we asked English Language Specialist Lucie Urbančíková to join our brainstorming and planning.

Then we had a stroke of luck: we became aware of an Erasmus+ Grant that aligned with our objectives.

Erasmus + is a European Union funding program that seeks to support and facilitate:

> "...the transnational and international cooperation between organisations in the fields of education, training, youth and sport ... It facilitates the circulation of ideas and the transmission of best practices and expertise and the development of digital capabilities thus

> contributing to a high-quality education while strengthening social cohesion." (Part A: General Information about the Erasmus+ Programme | Erasmus+, n.d.)

When we were awarded the grant titled "Building Bilingual Programs in Elementary Schools" in late 2022 our humble effort to begin to fill a need in the bilingual education world, was given a big push forward with the invaluable financing from an Erasmus+ grant. This allowed us to think BIG and involve other educators with complementary expertise. Two school founders, Lucy Welsted and Maria Smirnova joined our team in addition to university professor and second language acquisition specialist Dr. Aoife Ahern. This permitted us to expand our "Bilingual Montessori project" work, to be in conversation with practitioners and to create resources that, we believe, will be helpful to all educators working in schools with a developmental approach to education and a second language program.

Aware that we have been gifted the valuable resource of time, we gathered the combined knowledge and experience of second language acquisition researchers, language specialists, teachers and school leaders to bring you this Field Guide. We sincerely hope it helps readers improve practices in their schools

2. What is a developmental approach to education?

The core contributors to this Field Guide draw upon their expertise in Montessori education, linguistics and teacher training recognising that many of the insights they offer can benefit educators across various pedagogical frameworks. These include schools with child-led and inquiry-based learning models, such as IB (International Baccalaureate) schools, Reggio Emilia-inspired programs, Waldorf schools, and others. Collectively, these schools can be described as embracing a "developmental approach to education."

This term refers to educational practices that adopt a holistic perspective on children and their learning processes, emphasising individual growth and development. Schools with a developmental approach typically prioritise the following principles.

2.1. Key principles of the developmental approach

Holistic development

These schools aim to foster not only academic growth but also the interconnected development of social skills, physical well-being, and self-respect—foundations for becoming responsible members of society.

Child-centred learning

Students are the protagonists of their own learning. The adult serves the role of "guide" in preparing the learning environment and materials. This comes with the recognition that every student develops at their own pace, and possesses unique strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles.

Experiential learning

Students engage in hands-on activities and real-world experiences, allowing them to explore, experiment, and actively participate in their learning.

Freedom and responsibility

Within the boundaries of ground rules and a well-prepared environment, children are granted responsibilities that align with their developmental readiness.

Guided participation

Teachers provide structured support, or scaffolding, to help students tackle tasks slightly beyond their current abilities. This might involve peer learning or offering guidance until students gain confidence and mastery over increasingly complex tasks.

2.2. Constructivist philosophies in education

A developmental approach also aligns with constructivist educational philosophies, which emphasise the role of children in actively constructing their own knowledge. Influential thinkers such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Maria Montessori laid the foundation for this approach in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dewey and Montessori stand out as thinkers who practised their theories of education and human development in schools. They created "living laboratories": Dewey opened the Lab School at the University of Chicago in 1896 and in 1907 Montessori was made responsible for a small centre in Rome

then went on to give training courses and support the opening of schools all over the world.

2.3. Learner autonomy in education

Another facet of the developmental approach is inspired by the Learner Autonomy movement, which originated in language learning in the 1970s. Initially designed for adult learners, this approach has since been adapted for secondary and middle school students. Key principles include:

- that knowledge from the first language (L1) is essential to learning the target language (TL);
- learners need to make choices and engage in evaluative reflection;
- that learners have 3 interdependent roles:
  - communicators continuously using and gradually developing their TL skills;
  - experimenters gradually understanding the cultural conventions of the TL;
  - intentional learners gradually developing an explicit awareness of metacognitive aspects of language learning. (Dam, 1995, Little, Dam, Legenhausen, 2017, p.2).

The synergy between Montessori pedagogy and Learner Autonomy was first explored by Birgitta Berger after meeting language educator Leni Dam in 2016. Berger "realised that learner autonomy and Montessori pedagogy were a perfect match, both striving for the development of motivated, active and independent learners." (Berger, 2019) Both approaches share a common goal: fostering motivated, active, and independent learners. She successfully introduced this approach into her classroom with elementary students and then began sharing the results with other Montessori educators, some of whom wrote their own articles about the marriage of the two approaches. (Winter, 2020)

3. Why a field guide?

- To share expertise and resources
- To build a body of knowledge and document our work
- To develop our community of practice
- To begin to respond to your questions

We created this "Field Guide" with examples and voices "from the field" as a whole school sourcebook with practical information and inspiration regarding classroom strategies and organisational practices based on what practitioners report. We chose this format because we were inspired by similar books published by other educators (Khan, Dubble, Pendleton, 1999, Senge, 1994)

3.1. Your questions & concerns

Since the beginning of our project, teachers and school leaders have responded to our surveys with questions and comments like the examples given here.

- How do I know if my approach of only speaking English is the most effective (I also speak French)?
- How does the shift from English as a second/foreign language (i.e. meeting native speak norms) to English as a lingua franca (i.e. a tool for intercultural communication) reflect in the classroom?
- How to encourage spontaneous L2 production?
- How to encourage a child to choose work and/or speak in their second language when it's easier for them to do it in their first language?
- How will we assess the language learning progress of the children? What assessment tools will we use?
- Montessori language materials are designed for native speakers and are not appropriate for children learning a second language. Please see Section 1.3
- The materials I have seen in a bilingual Montessori environment are not sufficient for introducing the L2 in a fun way that encourages and sparks a desire to learn more.
- …I find that I need to look for images for some presentations for English language learners … these adaptations take a lot of extra preparation time… There isn't any known shared bank of resources with adaptations for non-native speakers (yet).

3.2. Answers on the Bilingual Montessori website

Since our core purpose is to fill a void of information and community, we created a virtual home for resources and invited you, our community, to join and share experiences to begin building our knowledge library of effective practices. The BM Video library, which you can access via our website or our YouTube channel is a great place to begin looking for answers to your questions.

What can be found on our website:

- BM Community Conversations - a series of talks recorded live with an audience with invited practitioners sharing their expertise and receiving feedback and questions from others present;
- BM Webinars - were a series of 10 webinars that were commissioned to cover in more detail or from a different angle;
- Notes from the Field is - our blog where members of our community share their experiences, reflections, and ongoing questions;
- "Building Bilingual Elementary Programs: A field guide for school leaders, classroom guides and second language teachers" or "BM Field Guide" for short - a place for theoretical and practical information produced by experts.

3.3. The field guide is comprised of 3 parts:

- **Part 1**: **Designing a Bilingual Program** – to guide Administrators, School Leaders and Language Coordinators: those responsible for creating and implementing a second language program.
- **Part 2**: **Understanding Language Learning** – An overview of the theory behind language acquisition and learning intended for classroom guides and assistants who do not have a background in language learning.
- **Part 3**: **Preparing the Bilingual Learning Environment** – a look at specific topics relevant to engaging learners, practical setup of bilingual classrooms including materials, assessment, oral and written literacy and grammar.

We undertook a Case Study Research Project, to formally gather information, from bilingual Montessori schools, on effective practices. The information collected also informed the contents of the Field Guide.

The research was designed to gather comprehensive data from schools by examining three key perspectives to:

- **Administrators** - providing insights from the management and organisational level
- **Classroom guides (teachers)** - offering a perspective from direct instructional experience seen through their Montessori training
- **Language specialists** - offering a perspective from direct instructional experience through their expertise in language acquisition and instruction

The study specifically emphasised the local socio-linguistic context - meaning the language environment and cultural factors unique to each location. This focus was included because the researchers recognised that teaching practices that succeed in one environment might not work in another due to different:

- language backgrounds of students;
- community language use patterns;
- cultural factors;
- local educational needs.

The findings from this research were then incorporated into a Field Guide, suggesting this was a practical, application-focused study meant to inform real-world educational practices.

3.4. Use of this Field Guide

We envision that you will be able to use this book as a reference book to consult when you have a specific question in mind or are looking for a sample document on a particular topic. Maybe you will want to refer to the more technical aspects of language acquisition from Part 2 (see section 2.6. Stages in children's additional language acquisition) in preparation for a meeting with parents. Or maybe you will need to come back to Part 3 "Preparing the bilingual learning environment" at some point when the linguistic profile of the students in your class has shifted, requiring new strategies. Or perhaps you are a school leader who will refer regularly to the whole of Part 1 "Designing a Bilingual Program as your program evolves. These are our ideas, but of course, you will find what suits you.

The Pause and Reflect questions throughout are designed to encourage your deeper engagement with the material and to facilitate the practical application of key concepts in your everyday classroom practice. These reflective prompts are strategically placed throughout the guide to help you connect theoretical ideas and research findings to the context of your school. As an L2 teacher or classroom guide in a 6-12 environment, or a school administratoit is important to pause at these moments, reflect on the questions posed, and consider how you can bring the insights discussed in the text to the children in your school. By taking time to reflect, you will gain a more profound understanding of how to support language development, incorporate diverse learning strategies, and foster an inclusive environment. We encourage you to write down your responses, share your thoughts with colleagues, or use the questions as the basis for professional discussion. This reflective process will not only enrich your practice but will also empower you to be more intentional in your pedagogical decisions, ultimately enhancing the learning experiences of your students.

4. Guideposts for a lonely journey

One of our guiding principles is that schools educating in more than one language are on their own unique journey, which can be lonely. At the heart of multilingual education lies a fundamental understanding: every school teaching in multiple languages embarks on its own distinct journey, and this path can often feel solitary. This book seeks to address that sense of isolation by bringing together practical strategies and experiences from fellow educators across different contexts.

By sharing specific examples of effective practices, each carefully situated within their local environments, we hope to help readers recognise and appreciate the unique characteristics of their own schools and classrooms. These distinct features ultimately shape their educational path forward. While no two journeys are identical, the experiences of others can serve as valuable guideposts, offering inspiration and insight along the way.

Throughout this exploration, it becomes increasingly clear that there cannot be a universal "how-to" manual for multilingual education. Instead, each school must chart its own course, drawing inspiration from others while remaining true to its unique circumstances, student needs, and community context. The richness of these varied experiences creates a tapestry of

approaches, each valuable in its own right and each contributing to our collective understanding of multilingual education.

A friendly feeling towards error …

> *… Cultivate a friendly feeling towards error and treat I as a companion inseparable from our lives, as something having a purpose, which it truly has.*

<div align="right">

Maria Montessori
The Absorbent Mind, 225

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This advice is intended as an additional guidepost for educators in multilingual schools that prioritise learner autonomy while addressing specific pedagogical challenges. Our growing knowledge library aims to uncover and share the solutions that teachers have developed with their students. To better understand the structure and teaching strategies of these schools, we have conducted case study interviews with teachers, language specialists, and school leaders. Additionally, experienced practitioners have contributed their insights in writing.

While more dynamic approaches like translanguaging have become widely accepted in recent years, this represents a significant shift from practices just 10–15 years ago. Back then, bilingual education largely relied on strict language separation—by subject, teacher, or schedule. So we assume practices will continue to evolve with new insights and ongoing experience.

There are several models for introducing an additional language, such as immersion, dual language, exploration, or exposure, which are explained in Section 1.3. Schools themselves may be described as bilingual, multilingual, or international, but these terms often lack universally agreed-upon definitions. Each school must define what these terms mean for their unique context and how they are implemented in practice.

5. Notes on Language and Location

Our perspective on multilingual education is shaped by our European perspective and experiences. Across Europe, a distinct pattern emerges in language education: even in communities where multiple languages are readily available and actively used, English consistently is one of the

additional languages offered in schools, and quite often the target language. This preference for English as the target language reflects both global trends and local educational priorities.

This focus on English as the additional language exists within a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity. Many students in these schools bring their heritage languages from home, speaking different languages with their families and in their communities. Rather than viewing this linguistic diversity as a challenge, schools can harness it as an asset, using it to foster a more inclusive and open-minded school community. These varied linguistic backgrounds create opportunities for cultural exchange and deeper understanding among students, staff, and families.

Our discussion of bilingual education therefore primarily examines scenarios where English serves as the target or additional language while acknowledging and celebrating the broader multilingual landscape that exists within school communities. This reflects not just an educational choice, but the reality of how many European schools approach language learning today.

5.1. Language, Gender, and Representation

English, compared to many Romance languages, has the advantage of using more gender-neutral nouns (e.g., "child" or "children"), though its pronoun system remains gendered. To ensure a balanced representation of female and male children in readers' minds when discussing examples from early childhood and elementary classrooms, we deliberately alternate between "she" and "he." This choice is not meant to disregard expanded understandings of gender, including "they" and other non-binary categories, but rather to prioritise the visibility of female students in education. The struggle for gender parity in educational and professional spaces is ongoing, and highlighting female students in our writing is a deliberate step toward addressing this imbalance.

5.2.   Bilingual and multilingual

We use these terms interchangeably as we understand bilingual to mean two or more languages, just as multilingual does.

5.3. Montessori education and language learning

This diversity is particularly evident in schools following an educational philosophy similar to that of Maria Montessori. Montessori environments foster

learning by sparking curiosity through carefully designed activities that engage children and encourage intrinsic motivation. However, when the language being acquired at school is unfamiliar to the child, the standard sequence of the curriculum may need adaptation. For instance, students may lack the vocabulary needed to engage with certain materials, requiring thoughtful adjustments to their learning journey.

We continue to gather and share experiences that demonstrate how schools can meet these linguistic needs while staying true to the Montessori philosophy. By respecting the underlying principles of Montessori education, educators can create environments that support language acquisition and nurture the holistic development of each child.

6. Concluding thoughts

This work represents a thorough compilation of our current knowledge and experience in second-language education while acknowledging that it remains a work in progress rather than a final statement. We have approached this task with sincere dedication, aiming to share our insights so that others need not start from scratch or "reinvent the wheel."

What we present here is essentially a snapshot in time - a detailed picture of current understanding and best practices in second language learning as we know them today. We fully recognise that this field is dynamic and ever-evolving. As educators and researchers continue to innovate and discover new approaches, our own understanding and methods will naturally grow and adapt alongside the broader educational community.

This acknowledgement of ongoing learning and development reflects a fundamental truth in education: that our understanding of how best to teach and learn languages continues to deepen and expand. We remain students ourselves in this journey, learning alongside our colleagues as we all work to enhance second language education practices.

Our goal is to provide valuable insights from our experience while maintaining humility about the evolving nature of this field. We see this as part of an ongoing dialogue rather than a definitive conclusion to the conversation about best practices in second language learning.

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Part two

Understanding language learning

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Bilingual Montessori

Introduction

Part two provides classroom guides and school leaders with an introduction to theories of language acquisition and school-based learning.

Section 2.1 examines innate language development in infants and young children, covering key developmental milestones and the transition from oracy to literacy. Section 2.2, "Role of Language Identity and Cultural Grounding," explores the interconnected relationship between language, culture, and identity. It addresses language dominance and strategies for engaging families in goal setting.

Section 2.3 provides an overview of the distinctions between language acquisition and language learning. It emphasizes the importance of metalinguistic awareness in literacy development and examines how natural grammar acquisition may differ from traditional grammar instruction methods.

Section 2.4 presents a comprehensive description of communication modes and explores how literacy skills transfer across languages. Section 2.5 examines Learner Autonomy methods, while Section 2.6 outlines the essential stages of language acquisition that educators need to understand.

The Part concludes with a discussion of Assessment and the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR), highlighting how its "can-do" statements serve as effective tools for helping learners recognize and evaluate their language abilities.

Building Bilingual Elementary Programs

Part two | Understanding language learning

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Understanding language learning

2.1. Setting the stage: language acquisition & development

Contents

Key takeaways

- Children exhibit an **innate capacity** for language acquisition during sensitive periods.
- Infants experience **critical sensitive periods** where they can distinguish language sounds.
- **Key milestones** in language development include first words emerging around age one, with bilingual children acquiring vocabulary more slowly.
- From ages 2 to 6, children show significant **grammatical development** as they rapidly expand their vocabulary and complexity.
- The **literacy transition** during ages 6-12 focuses on moving from learning to read to reading for knowledge, boosting vocabulary and skills.

Introduction

In this section, there is an overview of language acquisition, covering its foundational stages from infancy through the elementary years. Language development is a highly elaborate process, influenced by both innate biological predispositions and the quality of environmental interactions. We explore the critical periods that facilitate early language absorption, emphasising how these initial experiences shape a child's linguistic capabilities. Additionally, we discuss the evolution of language skills in toddlers and their progression into literacy during the elementary school years. By understanding these stages, educators can better support children's linguistic development, especially in multilingual contexts, ensuring optimal conditions for language learning.

1. Language acquisition in infancy

There are different schools of thought about the factors that enable human beings to develop language. The existence of an innate predisposition for language is, nowadays, accepted as a scientifically proven fact. Humans are born with what has been called an innate endowment for language, although experts have different views on the specificities of this biological predisposition (for instance generative linguistics, based on the theory developed by Noam Chomsky as opposed to usage-based perspectives like Michael Thomasello's). Whatever theoretical perspective we may prefer or assume, professionals involved in language education for children, in their first or additional languages, have the privilege of observing, guiding and participating in the unfolding of the uniquely human capability for linguistic communication and full participation in the social uses of language.

The acquisition process for our first language(s) – under appropriate conditions, more than one language can be acquired simultaneously – begins even before birth. When a foetus has developed its hearing organs, during the final 10 weeks of gestation it can distinguish between the vowel sounds of its mother's language(s) and other sounds so that it already pays special attention to the phonemes (sounds) of these languages: the very first steps of the acquisition process (Moon, Lagercrantz and Kuhl, 2012). Clearly, the conditions under which language acquisition takes place, from before birth, through early infancy and the first years of life, are part of the "magic" that enables all typical developing human children to become fully proficient in spoken interaction in any languages they are acquiring, without apparent

conscious effort.

This early capacity for absorbing language takes place during a critical period or sensitive period, for language acquisition. Sensitive periods consist of time windows within which certain essential features must receive stimuli and develop. These features include senses, such as sight, survival needs such as attachment, as well as, other faculties like language. After this period it may not be possible to fully develop some of them (more references and details here). In Maria Montessori's works, as explained in Part I, several sensitive periods in addition to the one for language were posited.

Returning to the example mentioned above, within the area of language, there is abundant scientific evidence of a sensitive period for phonology. Young infants can hear phonological distinctions - contrasts between sounds that differentiate words in a language. In English /l/ and /r/ distinguish, for instance, right from light although in other languages, such as Japanese, they are sounds that do not contrast phonologically, that is, they don't differentiate any words. By 6 months, the infant begins to lose the ability to perceive the sound contrasts that are not significant in the language or languages they are acquiring. By about 14 months the infant will have established a clearly marked phonological representation of their first language or languages (Bialystok et al., 2009); that is, a clear awareness of the specific, meaningful sounds of their native languages, as opposed to other sounds. This early experience may noticeably affect the child's acquisition of other languages later in life, for example, any additional languages may be spoken with an obvious accent if acquisition begins after this sensitive period.

These sensitive periods are, in part, biologically determined; yet, as stated by Ellen Bialystok (2009), the biological unfolding of language acquisition is "finely tuned to the features of environmental input, the child's attentional and perceptual abilities, and the development of cognitive and conceptual competencies" (p. 91). Therefore, on one hand, infants and very young children are physiologically "pre-wired" for language acquisition, meaning that their natural development involves certain biologically determined maturational processes that, in turn, trigger or guide the language acquisition process. Yet on the other hand, these processes rely on input and interaction with others, within an external environment that must fulfil certain conditions.

When we observe a developing infant, certain crucial milestones stand out,

for instance, the moment when they produce their first meaningful word. On average, children acquire their first word around their first birthday. Another critical milestone is when the child builds up their vocabulary to around 50 words at, on average, about 18 months. Both these milestones are reached by monolingual and bilingual children around the same age. However, bilingual children acquire vocabulary more slowly in each of the two languages than a monolingual child in their only language; and this tendency is consistent over time.

Whether the sum of all the words in the vocabularies of a bi- or multilingual child is similar to that of a monolingual child's vocabulary is difficult to determine. In any case, it is likely that having vocabulary in more than one language doesn't lead to knowing fewer words in total, but that the words are distributed across their languages. This is important to keep in mind if we work with children exposed to more than one language from birth: teachers may inadvertently discourage parents or precipitate negative consequences by commenting on a multilingual child's limited vocabulary in one of their languages. Instead, it is paramount to value chilldren's progress as multilinguals.

2. Language in toddlers and early childhood

The development of the defining feature of human language arises from the critical landmark of being able to produce about 50 words. A child's grammatical competence develops hand-in-hand with their vocabulary; beyond knowledge of sounds or individual words to include the grammatical combinations of words that express utterances or sentences. The human tendencies for exploration, orientation, and above all, communication provide the impulses that spark a child to progress in their language abilities, developing the major features of language - sounds, words and grammar - within an adequate environment that provides opportunities to share experiences and interact with others.

The first plane of development (up to age 6) includes an initial phase that Montessori attributed to the sensitive periods for language. During the later phase of this plane, the child's command of the sounds, words and grammar of their language or languages is extended and deepened. As soon as their vocabulary size reaches about 50 words and children begin developing

grammatical representations, they rapidly progress in both areas, acquiring, on average, 6 new words daily throughout ages 2 to 6. Their utterances begin to include more refined grammatical information, such as:

- noun groups that include an adjective + noun
- verbs in the past tense
- connectors like "and" or "but"
- prepositions for expressing location and movement
- and later: plural forms
- possessives
- subordinate clauses to describe nouns (relative clauses)
- question structures (interrogative forms).

Children entering the second plane of development have a fairly solid oral command of their language(s) and their vocabulary at age 5 is typically made up of around 10,000 words.

3. Language development in the elementary school years

The second plane of development is when children are strongly driven to expand their engagement in the social world, so the well-established language abilities they have been developing are fundamental, becoming increasingly sophisticated throughout this period. Literacy, that is, the ability to read and write proficiently, is the most outstanding and crucial area of language development from ages 6 up to 12 although we continue to progress in this area over many more years, into adulthood.

Research on the development and assessment of literacy shows that it is a universal tendency for children to transition from a phase of learning-to-read and write (in the first sub-plane, from around age 6 to age 8 or 9) to a new phase of reading-to-learn, from about age 9 onwards.

Reading to learn will form the basis for moving on to the next educational stages and is fundamental to their educational progress in the third plane of development (ages 12 to 18). This is when autonomous learning from reading, note-taking and writing a range of texts will key for their educational progress in most cases. Meanwhile, the child's vocabulary continues to grow at a faster rate, thanks to increasingly sophisticated spoken interaction and all the new words and expressions that they are exposed to when they read different

texts. This is true whether they read for the discovery and learning of new facts or for pleasure.

The language learning that takes place through reading texts, characterised by different author purposes (entertaining, informing, persuading...), is also combined with the child's learning from new social situations where they interact with people that have a range of roles (authority figures, peers, teachers or guides, service providers, and so on). This variation of input, or exposure, helps to gain a more precise understanding of the various ways that language is used. These experiences aid children in becoming capable language users who can convey their messages with more or less complex vocabulary and employ sentence structures and strategies for expressing deference, cooperation or myriad other ways of relating to others. The developing child's awareness of these nuances of language and how we use it to communicate and participate in different relationships are gradually constructed and applied with increasing skill.

All of the information given in this section thus far refers generally to the child's acquisition of the language(s) that are both their family language and that of wider society and schooling; based on these processes, some comparisons can be made with the characteristics of second or additional language acquisition and development. In the next section, we will explore aspects that are most likely of the readers' concern: how do children acquire and learn a second, subsequent or additional language? How can Montessori guides, teachers, assistants and other educational practitioners meet their needs and optimally promote their educational success in a multi- or bilingual setting?

Pause and reflect

- What information was the most surprising for me after reading this text?
- How has my understanding of language acquisition changed based on the insights presented?
- What practices can I adopt to help children understand and adapt to communicate properly in different social contexts?

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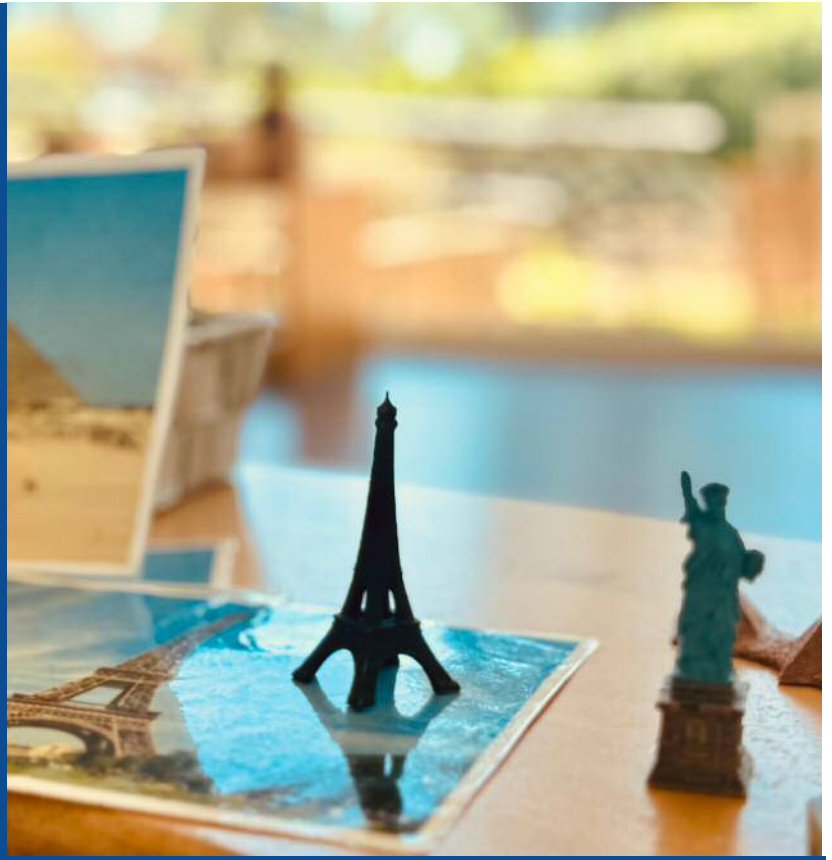
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Understanding language learning

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Key takeaways

- The role of **language and identity** is crucial as it helps form connections, a sense of belonging and a child's identity development.
- **Cultural language use** involves specific social practices that evolve within groups, shaping individual and collective identity.
- **Motivation in language learning** is strongly influenced by a child's developmental stage and the presence of peers.
- **Language dominance nuances** indicate that a bilingual child's proficiency varies by context.
- **Collaborative goal-setting** with families in establishing appropriate language learning objectives aligns with Montessori principles.

Introduction

In this section, we explore the profound relationship between language, identity formation, and cultural grounding, emphasising how language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a vital element in developing a sense of belonging and self. As children extend the scope of their social interactions, language becomes a core part of relationships and experiences, shaping their identities within cultural contexts. We examine how the social uses of language vary across cultures and how these variations influence children's motivations and behaviours, especially in multilingual settings. By acknowledging the fluid nature of identity in contemporary society, educators can better support children as they engage with additional languages, empowering them to form part of diverse linguistic communities. In this section, we also present information about the concept of lanague dominance. A good understanding of what it means can help teachers to be fully aware of children's competence across languages that they are developing at home and in the school community.

1. The role of language in identity formation and cultural grounding

One way in which language is of utmost value to humans is that by speaking any particular language, we develop our sense of connection to others and belonging, which are fundamental needs that form the basis of well-being and development in all areas of life. As the young child grows and flourishes, they are simultaneously forming their identity, and language is intimately interwoven with this process. Language becomes a lens through which each person experiences their life and makes sense of the situations and relationships that they are involved in.

In addition, within each culture, the social uses of language make up specific ways of functioning and getting things done. We choose the language forms that are culturally appropriate to the situation and purpose of our interactions; from how we greet others, share a meal or make a purchase, to how we request help, tell stories or show kindness. These ways of getting things done and of making meaning through language constantly evolve in social groups affecting behavioural codes and the individual and collective understanding of identity and position in the social world.

The impact language has on these most essential aspects of our being - identity and culture - must be kept in mind when an additional language is introduced in children's daily lives, for instance in a bilingual school. Children are strongly driven by the human tendencies mentioned in Part I, and their behaviour and needs are determined also by the characteristics of their plane of development. These are amongst many factors that impact children's motivation and ability to progress in acquiring new languages, beyond any decision or expectation of their parents/guardians and educators.

Educators hoping to guide children's second or additional language development must work to help them build their identities as speakers of this new language. This issue is situated within a complex and fast-evolving area, that of contemporary notions of identity in current societies; for an array of reasons, identity has become a more fluid, flexible concept. As stated by Dörnyie and Ushioda (2009), the world that learners of second or additional languages face is "now increasingly characterised by linguistic and sociocultural diversity and fluidity, where language use, ethnicity, identity and hybridity have become complex topical issues" (p. 1). For children to feel deep and long-term motivation to become English speakers, they must be open to feeling part of a non-specific global community of English language users, and eventually create an internal representation of themselves as a member of that community.

For instance, the Montessori educators interviewed in our research often mention how the presence of children who are monolingual in the school's target language within a class group can be a crucial factor in determining the languages children are inclined to speak and want to improve. If the target language is English, and one or two children for whom English is their only language join an elementary class, it often leads to the whole class of English as a second/additional language learners being more inclined to adopt English as their preferred language for interacting and playing at school. This is logical if we consider one of the core second-plane characteristics: the child's strong desire to develop, strengthen and deepen their social relations. The desire to identify with peers is a powerful force that can drive children, above all efforts that adults might make, to be motivated to use and improve the target language. Experiencing the fact that other children, peers they may admire or want to befriend, speak only the target language makes the need to learn this language very real in the child's world,

over and above all the efforts that adults might make to motivate them.

When schools are multilingual, like the Palau Montessori School in Figueras, Spain, the dynamics that affect language choice and use become more complex. The community's regional language is Catalan, the national language is Spanish and the school's additional languages are English and French. The school community (children and their families, and school staff) includes people of different origins and who have varied language profiles and priorities; some of the families choose this school because they are from abroad, perhaps new in the area, and would like their children to develop Catalan or Spanish as a priority. Spanish may be the preferred objective for some, considering its status as a very widely spoken language; however, the children themselves might quickly develop different priorities; the language of social interaction in their class is most often Catalan.

In the longer term, if the children remain in Figueras it is extremely likely they will develop very fluent Spanish and Catalan even though a snapshot of their language skills at a given moment might show that they are better at one or the other. The school's bilingual education program established that each of these two languages was the medium for work over alternating 2-week periods providing a balanced development of both. English is the third language, so pupils usually reach a command of this language at the "basic user" level (A2 according to the CEFR) by the end of elementary.

Situations where the parents' hopes conflict with the child's choices and preferences for one or another language can easily generate tension and put pressure on the child. This tension arises from a limited understanding of the need driven by a child's core human tendency to engage in communication and to develop the necessary socio-emotional skills critical to the second plane of development that naturally drives the child to prioritise the language of social peer interaction. School staff should be prepared to explain these issues to parents to assist them in taking a wider perspective, beyond considering the language "snapshot" of a particular period. Staff can remind parents that while one language may be dominant in the child's environment and become their preferred language for a time, this won't determine their long-term abilities as long as they are consistently exposed to the other language/s in a range of situations (classes, TV, gaming, music).

2. Language dominance in bi- or multilingual individuals

The age debate mentioned earlier, focuses on whether starting later in childhood, as an adolescent or as an adult, makes it harder to become fluent in a second language. In general, the older a person is when they begin to spend time hearing or using the target language, the harder it is for them to become truly fluent and proficient. The time when a learner starts regularly hearing, and eventually, using a new language is called the age of onset, or the Age of Acquisition (AoA) (Birdsong (2014)).

On the other hand, it is important to realise that the first language acquired is not necessarily a person's dominant language. As explained by David Birdsong, a top expert in this concept, language dominance, "observed asymmetries of skill in, or use of, one language over the other" (p. 374), is determined by two aspects: dimensions and domains. Dimensions are the linguistic areas in which we can identify proficiency in a language, like the following:

- **fluency** in speaking (speaking without a lot of hesitation and being able to adjust your voice's volume, intonation and clarity);
- vocabulary (technically, **lexical diversity** - knowing words that are associated with many different situations and purposes);
- **length of utterances** (being able to speak with longer and more complex phrases) and
- **accurate comprehension**.

Domains consist of the contexts and ways we use the language in different settings, such as:

- at school: with peers, child to adult and vice versa, giving a talk or presentation;
- for transactions: online, in a shop, at play, in transportation, and so on.

So domains involve activities where the speaker has certain purposes or intentions, while dimensions are inherent to being a speaker of any language, in any situation; domains are activities and situations where we apply the dimensions of language competence.

These notions are important for understanding how to describe and assess bi- or plurilingual competence. A bilingual child is not just dominant in one language; they are dominant to a certain degree. That is, to accurately identify the nuances of bilingual competence, we need to consider the learner's competence in using a language across different dimensions and across different domains. Often, an adult who learnt an additional language at school may use that language for reading and possibly writing, but when they must understand and produce it orally, find themselves very limited. Or, as Birdsong (2014) states:

> "a given bilingual individual may be strongly dominant in one language in terms of speech rate, but at the same time display poor knowledge of that language's inflectional morphology (that is, of how to correctly use singular or plural forms, verb conjugation and other forms of grammar). Another hypothetical bilingual may have a faultless command of formal features of agreement in one language, but find it more difficult to understand phone conversations in that language relative to the other" (p. 377).

What Birdsong expresses here is that some bilinguals may use one of their languages very fluently for conveying messages, while failing to use the grammar with precision. Other people might be very accurate in the formal correction of their speech, but slow to understand and be able to say things appropriately in some situations, including everyday life situations, like phone calls.

The implications of these concepts are relevant for educators in bilingual programs; they can help improve our educational practices in different areas. For example, if we consider them when developing assessment tools, they can help us to negotiate and establish appropriate learning objectives. For instance, the notion of domain is essential for assessing vocabulary, one of the three key areas in language competence (alongside phonology and

grammar, the sounds and structures or word combinations of language), significantly impacting many other areas of the child's development, such as literacy. Bilingual children consistently score lower on receptive vocabulary assessments (often carried out with a standardised test called the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) in each of their languages compared to monolingual children. That means bilingual children understand fewer words in each of their languages when compared with children of the same age who only speak one language (Bialystok, 2009).

In certain age groups however, such as 6-year-olds, research showed that both monolingual and bilingual children were about equally able to understand words associated with school, such as astronaut, rectangle, and writing but bilingual children scored lower on words associated with home, like canoe, pitcher, lampshade. In other words, the studies Bialystok mentions suggested that bilingual children's dominance, in the lexical diversity dimension, was relatively lower in the domain of home life, but not in that of schoolwork. For a parent or educator, realising that although a child's dominant language outside school (e.g. in domains connected to their family life) may be their mother tongue, if they study in a bilingual program the target language may be their dominant language in the domain of school learning.

How we rely on the notions of dimensions and domains in identifying a child's dominant language will change depending on their age. When children are still very young speakers of their languages, at age 3 for example, their experiences are quite limited and our focus will mainly be on the dimensions (how much, how fluently do they speak the languages). Whereas while children transition through the elementary years, their life experiences are expanding and leading them to use languages in more different domains. On the other hand, even a very balanced bilingual with two mother tongues may feel differently about each language and prefer one or another.

An effective practice implemented at the bilingual Montessori schools we have researched, concerning these issues, is to work with the children's families to identify which objectives are appropriate for each pupil. These objectives depend on the families' (hopefully, in consensus with the children's) plans or intentions for the next stage of education. Specifically, children whose families expect to send them to an international school where they'll be educated through English (or another additional language), would benefit from achieving relatively high dominance in academic language. These

children will need to be fully literate in English and able to understand both spoken and written content in the language from across the entire curriculum: science, arts, geography, history, etc. The students and their families should participate in setting learning goals to build up all the skills necessary for the following school stages. School staff can advise the families about how to encourage their children's motivation and learning opportunities, suggesting different initiatives they can take, such as encouraging plenty of reading, travel, cultural activities and other occasions for interacting through the target language.

These practices of involving learners in establishing the goals they need to reach and participating in planning how they will do this follow some important principles of Montessori Education.

- Learning and well-being are improved when people have a sense of control over their lives.
- People learn better when they are interested in what they are learning.
- The ability to direct one's attention in a sustained and concentrated way fosters an array of positive developments and is in itself trainable.

Pause and reflect

- In your classroom, how can you identify the various domains (e.g., academic, social, family) in which each child is most proficient in L1 and in L2?
- How can you tailor your L2 teaching strategies to support bilingual children who may have a higher fluency in one language but struggle with formal grammar in that same language?
- When working with bilingual students, how do you incorporate activities that support their language development across different domains, (eg. academic, social language), considering the specific needs of each student?
- Reflecting on the Montessori principles of autonomy and interest-driven learning, how can you help bilingual children to take ownership of their language learning process as they work towards higher proficiency in the target language for academic purposes?

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Understanding language learning

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Key takeaways

- A **balanced approach** to language learning and acquisition is key to fostering multilingualism in the classroom.
- **Language acquisition** flourishes in supportive, immersive environments.
- While young children are best positioned for **acquiring language** naturally, older children can still learn new languages effectively.
- **Metalinguistic awareness** is key to literacy development.
- Second language learners progress through a **natural order of grammar acquisition**, which may not align with how language is formally taught.

Introduction

This section explores the key processes involved in learning and acquiring an additional language, with a particular focus on the developmental conditions that enable children to effectively understand and express themselves in a second language. It distinguishes between learning, which requires conscious effort, and acquisition, which occurs unconsciously through immersion and interaction. Additionally, the text addresses the sensitive period for language acquisition and the implications for older learners, as well as the importance of fostering metalinguistic awareness—an explicit understanding of language structure—through playful activities. For educators, this means creating a classroom environment that supports both conscious learning and the natural, immersive acquisition of a new language, ensuring that children are provided with ample opportunities for exposure, interaction, and reflection.

1. Learning or acquiring an additional language

In this section, we focus on the fundamental conditions that lead to children developing the attitudes, knowledge and skills essential for confident understanding and expression in a new (second or additional) language. The distinction between the processes of learning versus acquiring languages is an essential point to consider. Learning a language, as any adult who has attempted this will know, requires some basic skills. For example, the ability to hear and read the language, preferably in graded stages, provides the opportunity to begin with frequently used, everyday expressions before moving on to expressions required for more specific situations. In addition to hearing and reading, learning also involves producing the language: attempting to pronounce words and expressions - which may include new sounds not present in their first language - and perhaps copying or taking note of those words and expressions.

Crucially, learning also involves conscious effort and strategic behaviour, such as deliberate practice pronouncing and working to remember the new language by writing expressions down, reviewing, etc. For instance, we listen to explanations of and study the rules for using modal verbs (like can, may or must) then think carefully about the order the words have to be used in while concentrating on sounds that may be difficult to pronounce or the stress

pattern of the words. Many children around the world are taught and expected to learn second languages during the years of elementary schooling.

On the other hand, acquiring a language is the unconscious process that leads individuals to communicate. That is, to understand, produce and interact through the language to fulfil all diverse purposes and goals. Typically developing children acquire (at least one) language based on plentiful exposure, hearing the language, especially when people, like their parents, siblings and others, talk to them, and by having opportunities to use the language for many different purposes. Rather than being a process that we are aware of, language acquisition happens without conscious effort.

The renowned linguist and second language acquisition expert, Stephen Krashen, developed research into the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Krashen built on this distinction (which he labelled "The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis") as a crucial part of an overall theory of second language acquisition that he developed (Krashen, 1985). The other hypotheses that make up his theory are helpful to know for anyone involved in second language or multilingual education:

- **The Natural Order Hypothesis**: in the process of learning or acquiring a second language (L2), grammatical competence tends to develop following a certain order of components, which do not align with what seems to go from the simple to the complex. That is, some kind of learner-internal criteria seem to make learners move forward in building up competence in grammar in an order that is not fully understood. One example Krashen cites is present simple verb conjugation in English. The addition of -s to the third person singular of verbs in present tense is a late-acquired feature of English grammar. At least for people who speak languages with different inflections for each form of a verb, this aspect of English probably seems very simple; but for both native and L2 speakers it tends to take a long time to consolidate, that is, it often takes years before a person accurately inflects verbs with -s in the right cases in English. In addition, the order in which grammatical components develop is impervious to the order in which teachers explain and have learners practise them. Learners and acquirers seem to be guided in their progress by a natural order of language elements.

- **The Monitor Hypothesis**: Krashen (1985, p. 1-2) proposed that the ability to actually use an L2 comes from subconscious knowledge. He adopted a strong position about the role of learning and conscious awareness, claiming that what we consciously know and think related to the L2 can't be used while we communicate in that language, but only to self-edit or check what we produce, that is, to monitor language production. Krashen related the Monitor to focusing on form, when language lessons prioritise using the language accurately overexpressing and understanding messages.

- **The Input Hypothesis**: Here, Krashen claims "humans acquire language in only one way - by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input'" (Krashen, 1985, p. 2). If the learner gets comprehensible input, that is, if they hear or read language- phrases, structures - that is slightly more complex than their current level of competence, they progress following the 'natural order'. As Krashen states, the learner moves from their current level i to a slightly more advanced level, if they are exposed to language that is a bit more complex, i +1. Within this hypothesis, Krashen also pointed out that speaking in an L2 ONLY develops as a result of "building competence via comprehensible input", and that speaking cannot be directly taught. In addition, he highlighted that grammar also develops similarly, as the necessary grammatical competence grows through exposure to the appropriate kind of input - comprehensible input.

- **The Affective Filter Hypothesis**: This hypothesis is about how acquisition can only take place if a person is receptive to the input, and a condition for this is that the person feels comfortable, does not lack self-confidence and does not feel anxious - for instance that their mistakes will be pointed out or reprimanded. Krashen goes on to state that in cases of anxiety or low confidence, a (mental) filter is raised which can block out the ability to acquire new language from input. In contrast, feeling that we are potential members of the target language-speaking group and involved in activities using the target language lowers the filter and raises our potential to acquire the language. This last hypothesis is especially relevant to the theme that we are spiralling around in our Field Guide: the goal of creating a culture of L2 communication. In this culture, which is supportive and

conducive to L2 learning, members of the school community feel part of a group of L2 users, which helps prevent the affective filter from being raised and, instead, contributes to the filter being lowered when learners do feel they are part of the L2 speaker group.

Pause and reflect

- How can you create a classroom environment that balances both the conscious effort of learning a language and the natural, immersive process of acquiring it?
- In what ways can you ensure that the language input provided to your students is comprehensible, yet slightly above their current level, to encourage their progression?
- How do you adapt your teaching strategies to support the development of language skills in the natural order?

2. The sensitive period for language and the age debate

In comparing language learning and language acquisition, we have just seen how they are processes that typically take place during different life periods: older children, at elementary school, up to adults, are the ones that are ready to learn languages, especially once they have developed literacy, whereas the conditions under which languages are first acquired are found very early in life.

The question that is inevitably asked when people reflect on the need to optimise language learning outcomes is whether languages can be acquired after infancy and early childhood. Long debates in the field of linguistics have centred on innateness, that is, whether the only way to become fully and truly proficient in a language is to acquire it from infancy building on the innate endowment of language, specific properties of the human mind present even before birth. It is often observed, in this regard – consistent with the evidence available today based on a large body of scientific studies – that certain aspects of language are, for most individuals, much more difficult to acquire beyond infancy. In other words, acquisition is facilitated in the earliest months and years of life thanks to a sequence of sensitive periods. This is the case, as mentioned previously, for phonology, whereas other areas of

language, like vocabulary and grammar, may be acquired in a second language in later childhood or older and lead to very similar final results to those of a mother-tongue speaker.

The core issue that we address in this guide, however, is just how educators can provide what is necessary for children who begin with an additional language at school, after infancy. Singleton and Pfenninger, researchers dedicated to the study of the effects of learners' age on their achievement in additional languages, summing up the findings of years of investigation on this topic, assert that beginning early is effective but only under certain conditions. These authors (2019) explain that what are known as "drip-feed" learning arrangements, in which children are exposed to a second language for a low number of hours per week over several years, have not been proven effective for very young children. The role of consistent, abundant exposure to a second/ additional language is crucial for ensuring effective acquisition.

In general, evidence shows that attaining truly bilingual development requires immersion as early as possible in the additional language, and its use for a wide range of developmentally appropriate purposes and interactional situations, such as play led by an adult through the L2, or hearing and interacting around attractive stories and picture-books (see Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Thus, the most natural process for becoming bilingual is by acquiring two languages from very early childhood. Children need exposure to the language, to use it for interaction (with objects and people) and doing things. They also benefit from hearing the language while receiving and using perceptual, visuospatial and other sensorimotor information for this interaction. That is, interacting where they employ all their senses and their physical body is involved.

Bilingual educational programs in elementary schools, when they are well designed and implemented, can still provide the necessary conditions for children to acquire a second/additional language. Meanwhile, a child's outcomes depend on a range of internal, individual and social factors, so even the best programs cannot necessarily guarantee that every learner will reach the same, final outcomes. The Montessori approach, based on the absolute respect for the child's free choice and natural inclinations in guiding their learning journeys, accepts this diversity as consistent with its principles. On the other hand, beyond the school, each child's exposure and engagement with the languages they are developing will vary, at least, partially based on their lived experiences as members of families and social

environments. This issue is related to the next section's topic: language dominance (see section 2.2. Role of language in identity formation and cultural grounding).

Pause and reflect

- How do you currently create opportunities for your students to have regular and meaningful exposure to a second language?
- Considering the research on the sensitive period for language acquisition, how can you ensure that younger learners are receiving the immersive, interactive language experiences they need?
- In what ways can you integrate developmentally appropriate activities into your language lessons to foster deeper engagement with the second language?
- What strategies do you use to accommodate different levels of language exposure among your students?

3.   Metalinguistic awareness: strengthening the multilingual child's language foundations

Metalinguistic awareness is a kind of explicit knowledge; that is, knowledge that we are aware of and can describe or explain to others. In particular, it is knowledge about language and the ability to reflect on language. It is different from being able to speak and understand the language, because of its explicit and reflective nature, as opposed to the kinds of implicit knowledge employed when we speak or listen in an everyday interaction. Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to separate language from meaning and recognise it as an arbitrary code that can be "dissected" and analysed. Children develop it by playing with language, singing silly songs, finding and using patterns of sounds like rhymes or alliteration and with the help of adults who guide and teach them about language.

This kind of awareness is often discussed in relation to learning to read because it includes phonological (recognition of the sounds of a language) and phonemic awareness (understanding of the relation between individual sounds and written symbols, or letters) which are fundamental for developing literacy. However, the relationship between metalinguistic awareness and

reading is even deeper than these fundamentals because it engages with the idea that words have different meanings depending on the context they are situated in. Adequate reading comprehension is based on knowing this, allowing us to realise that a sentence like linguist Noam Chomsky's well-known example, "Flying planes can be dangerous" can have, at least, two distinct meanings (referring to a dangerous thing, or to doing a dangerous activity) (Chomsky, 1965, p. 21).To differentiate meaning, phonological awareness alone is not sufficient. We must also utilise morphological, syntactic, and lexical awareness - all of which are subtypes of metalinguistic awareness. This includes:

- Morphological awareness: Understanding the meaningful parts of words, like roots, prefixes and suffixes
- Syntactic awareness: Knowledge of the structural, grammatical rules and principles, and sensitivity to when a string of words does not follow these principles (for instance, "going to the park" vs "the to going park")
- Lexical awareness: Familiarity with the set of words that make up the vocabulary of a language

The understandings that form part of metalinguistic awareness are independent of any specific language. The realisation that words have meaning(s) and can be represented in writing (sounds correspond to letters or characters) provides comprehension and forms part of the basis for becoming fully proficient in any language. Yet the content, exactly what we are aware of metalinguistically, will be in specific languages: we may know many cases of multiple meanings of individual words in Spanish but less, or none at all, in English, for instance.

Children typically acquire a good degree of metalinguistic awareness by about age 5 to 6, coinciding with the development of reading and writing. Many children become especially enthusiastic about jokes based on puns (double meanings) and riddles around the middle years of elementary when they find joy in their newly acquired levels of metalinguistic awareness (for some suggestions on how to promote this kind of language play in the classroom, see this Reading Rockets article). This period can also be especially productive for additional language learning, despite the sensitive periods for many aspects of language acquisition having ended after the earlier infant and toddler years.

Pause and reflect

- How can you integrate metalinguistic activities, such as rhymes and word games, into your classroom to support students' language awareness?
- In what ways do you encourage students to reflect on the structure and meaning of words?
- How do you help students understand that words can have different meanings depending on context?
- What strategies do you use to support the development of morphological, syntactic, and lexical awareness in multilingual learners?

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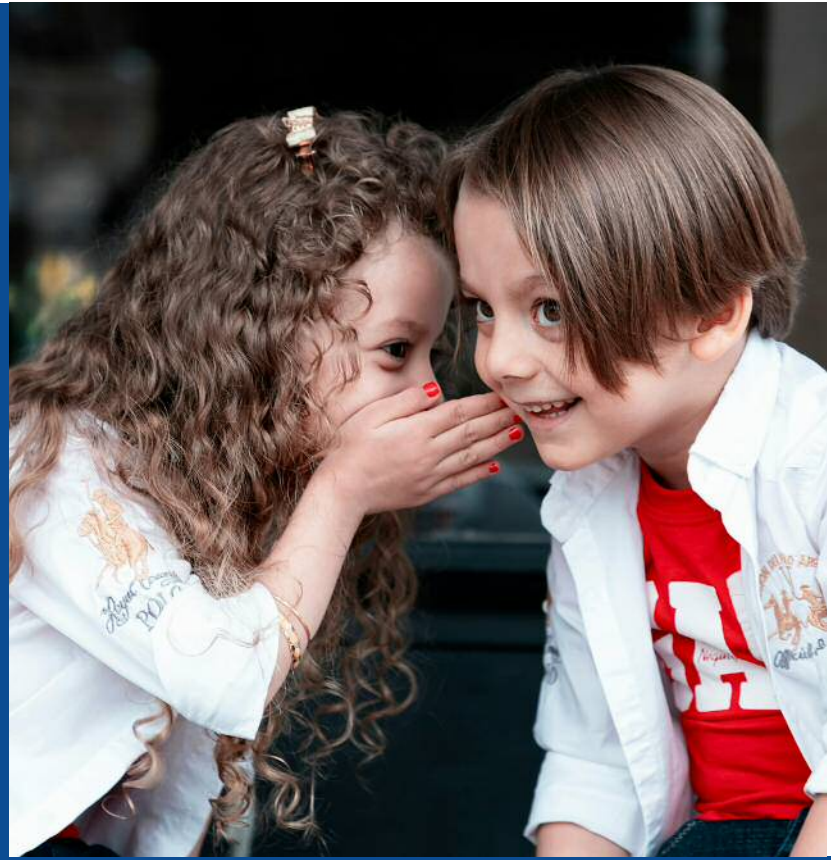Krashen, S. (1985). The Input Hypothesis. Issues and Implications. Longman.

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Key takeaways

- In the area of L2 teaching, there has been a shift from the traditional four-skills model to a '**modes of communication**' **approach** that emphasises interaction and mediation in real-life language use.
- Creating multisensory, **engaging environments** that spark curiosity and comfort, facilitate the process of natural language exploration.
- Utilising cross-lingual transfer of **literacy skills** from a child's first language, we enhance second language learning and comprehension.

Introduction

The European Centre for Modern Languages advocates a shift from the traditional "four skills" model—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—to the concept of "modes of communication," which emphasises the interconnectedness of communication processes, including interaction and mediation. This approach supports children's language acquisition, particularly in elementary settings, by highlighting the importance of a strong oral foundation for literacy development. As children learn a second language, their journey involves engaging in multisensory experiences that foster curiosity and active participation. Additionally, leveraging existing literacy skills through cross-lingual transfer enhances comprehension and communication abilities, preparing children for academic success and effective interaction in diverse contexts.

1. Modes of communication

The classical perspective on what is required to know a language is the command of four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the European Centre for Modern Languages, the official organism of the Council of Europe dedicated to promoting excellence in language teaching and innovative language education policies, advocates the need for a new concept to replace skills: modes of communication. They argue that the four skills paradigm proved limiting for language education and assessment because it presented one or another of the "skills" and their application in isolation. The reality is that in language use, when we communicate, we exchange messages, using not only productive (sustained speaking or writing) and receptive (sustained listening or reading) modes, but also interaction (spoken conversation or written exchanges that include production and reception) and mediation, which consists of reformulating, paraphrasing, summarising, translating or interpreting a text for a person who cannot access or understand it for themself (Council of Europe, 2020).

Mediation is a very interesting concept for education because although it is considered an essential part of all learning it is especially true for language learning. Any form of language learning teachers create or set up are forms of mediation because they make the target language accessible to the learners somehow.

Modes of communication and corresponding language activities (CEFR 2020)			
Reception	Oral comprehension		Reading comprehension
Production	Oral production (monologue)		Written production (creative writing)
Interaction	Oral interaction (discussion)	Online interaction (oral and written)	Written interaction (correspondence)
Mediation	Mediating concepts and communication		Mediating texts

The modes of communication help identify the learning value and appropriate objectives for language activities while ensuring the communicative value is paramount. Achieving a high command of an additional language means that we become strategic communicators, able to use the language effectively in a range of situations, with different purposes.

Educators should bear in mind that the shift away from the traditional "four skills" (listening, speaking, reading and writing) toward the modes of communication reflects and centres the reality of how we use languages. This perspective makes clear the major difference between interaction, when we speak and listen, read and write or combine any or all four of these activities almost simultaneously; as opposed to the receptive and productive modes, which are the ones we use when listening to a longer talk or recording, writing or reading longer texts, making presentations or giving a speech, when the speaker talks for a longer period without interruption, etc.

In terms of how children progress in an L2 during the elementary years, it is helpful to think about the skills to guide learners and know what to expect.

- When beginning to learn a new language in elementary, children need exposure to interesting interactive activities where they will hear plenty of expressions and sounds of the L2. This needs to be connected to the situation and experience: children begin by understanding language linked to the here and now. Also, the activities must be attractive and enjoyable. Then, like when an infant acquires their L1, the child who begins learning an

L2 can gradually start to understand through exposure and little by little, through interaction with the teacher.

- After some gradual introduction to listening to the L2 in engaging situations and activities, such as songs, finger play and action rhymes with simple vocabulary, thanks to their natural curiosity and enjoyment of language play children often want to begin to join in, reciting and singing along. They will build up their abilities in interaction and even produce more extended language when they enjoy the games, songs and rhymes, as they will spontaneously use them, following a natural impulse to practise, in private self-speech or to their peers.

So, for children in elementary, beginning with the L2 will, ideally, start with the spoken language only. This is especially worth considering if we work in lower elementary (with children under 8 years old) when many pupils are still in the process of consolidating the ability to write and read in the L1.

All along, the oral language basis must be a continually developing foundation. The oral language development is crucial for developing literacy skills. The ability to speak the language that we read is not only essential to highlight for children learning second languages; current research supports the idea that being able to talk and say expressions that we need to understand is more important than hearing (MacDonald's "Production, distribution, comprehension" theory). In the United Kingdom this concept about the oral basis of language as fundamental to reading and writing has been widely developed, for example, in Pie Corbett's "Talk for writing" approach. Participation in storytelling during shared book reading will provide crucial groundwork for the children's ability to write longer texts, like narratives, biographies or information reports.

Pause and reflect

- Reflecting on the shift from the four skills to modes of communication, how can you adjust your teaching methods to promote more holistic language usage among your students?
- What strategies do you use to ensure that your lessons connect language learning to children's real-life experiences and interests?
- In what ways do you currently facilitate mediation in your classroom?
- How might you expand these practices?

2. Learning spoken language

Section 2.6, Stages in children's additional language acquisition, discusses how children learning a second language at school progress through different stages. These stages are marked by how they first accept and begin to be aware of the L2 that they are being exposed to. Then, they eventually start responding by producing words and short phrases, as well as, participating in reciting chants, songs and other oral activities. Little by little, they acquire enough of the language to begin to use it for interaction and in an expanding range of situations, in both spoken and written form.

Children will begin a productive journey of language acquisition when a school offers spaces and situations that spark children's initial interest in the L2. The school must ensure that learners experience this initial spark and maintain engagement during the elementary years to fire the enthusiasm needed to become proficient bilinguals. To create the early interest in a second language and keep it strong, here are some recommendations to keep in mind, which are explained below.

- Educators set up multisensory experiences where children are introduced to a new language, connected to the experiences.
- Experiences and enjoyable interaction together are a cornerstone for making the language memorable.
  (see Community Conversations Montessori L2: The Intercultural Dimension with Licia Arnaboldi)
- Goals for helping children progress, based on their developmental stage and needs, should be a basis for offering them the appropriate activities and learning materials.
  (see Webinar Language Learning and Children's Cognitive Development with Elvira Masoura)
- Assessment in different forms - through adult observation, selected activities and conversations, as well as, peer observation and feedback - will give information that will lead to identifying new learning goals and activities.
  (see Webinar Practical Ideas for Assessment of a Bilingual Programme with Lucie Urbančíková)

A principle for the first stages of oral language acquisition is to support children by creating situations where they are introduced to interesting words and enticing ways to use the L2. Like acquiring a first language, the experiences associated with using a second language make it memorable.

The association between language and contextualised experiences leads to what is known as episodic memory, the memories of events and situations that we are involved in, making the language more accessible than if it is studied separately from using the language to do things. Direct links between the new language, and the concepts it represents, are how children develop knowledge-rich, embodied understanding. When children interact with the new language in interesting situations and involve actions and attractive materials, it builds a foundation of long-term and easily accessible concepts, words and expressions that are absorbed into their minds.

In other words, the effective development of children's oral L2 competence has to include an adult patiently guiding the child in engaging with attractive materials and physical manipulation, to create a context and make the language meaningful. These kinds of activities create what researchers call "perception-action based contexts" - situations where the L2 forms part of perceiving with all our senses and doing actions that the child enjoys. In these situations, all the conditions are present for the child to absorb, or implicitly learn, the L2. Many experts now agree that implicitly acquiring the L2 is the most effective and long-lasting form of learning; perception-action contexts are essential for grounding the abstract rules of the language structure and for making vocabulary memorable; what the research describes as creating strong representational foundations of language (Li & Jeung, 2020): a kind of long-term knowledge that allows us to remember and use language effectively.

So, to create ideal conditions for beginning with speaking an L2, the social and perceptual aspects of the learning situations are core conditions. The young child who is learning an L2 needs, first of all, to feel comfortable and unafraid to try out the language. They also have to feel curiosity for the language, and excitement towards using it, which is natural to young children as long as the learning situation offers chances for them to make meaningful connections with it. The multisensory learning process should involve children doing more than watching and listening to the teacher presenting new language and later repeating it. Children benefit by engaging through touch and movement while watching and listening using more than one of their five senses simultaneously. (Puchta & Elliot, 2017, p. 7). These perception-action contexts help overcome a challenge for many language learners, which is that L2 representations are reliant on the first language. This means when we try to understand or speak the L2 we need to translate into our L1 constantly

because we still haven't interiorised the new language. A Montessori environment can offer effective conditions where perception, action and language are integrated, using tangible learning materials and experiential, multisensory stimuli.

All these advantages of early oral language development are potential advantages of a bilingual program. However, the main thing that determines whether different kinds of materials and an adequate learning environment will be effective is the educators' knowledge and practices. To promote spoken language development, educators should be aware of some essential steps:

- Step 1 - Establish developmentally appropriate goals adapted to the children's needs;
  (see Webinar An Introduction to Language in the Montessori Elementary Classroom with Kyla Morenz and Webinar - Second Language Skills and Subskills in Elementary Classrooms with Laura Cassidy and Aoife Ahern)

- Step 2 - Organise materials and give children access to them based on the learning goals and their inclinations;
  (see Community Conversations Second Language Learning Materials for Independent Work with Lucie Urbančíková)

- Step 3 - Assess the children through observation and interaction over time, to apply new updates to the learning goals, materials and activities as they progress.
  (see Webinar Practical Ideas for Assessment of a Bilingual Programme with Lucie Urbančíková)

  N.B. The links above direct educators to relevant information and helpful resources from the Bilingual Montessori video library.

For the first step, we can use the table presented in section 2.6. to mark the learners' starting points based on their current stage of language acquisition. Teachers' interactions correspond to the children's development. That is, developmentally appropriate interaction in the L2 means that the learners can participate in communication in situations that they feel comfortable and engaged in. The level of challenge presented must be proportionate to the skills and knowledge the children have already developed. (Puchta & Elliot, 2017, p.7).

For each stage, different kinds of spoken language activities can offer children enjoyment, fulfilment and stimulate progress. In Part III of this guide, readers will find ideas and proposals for these.

At every stage, how adults interact with the learners is a key element. For successful language acquisition, children must hear a single message expressed several times using different words, and the connection to the situation must be clear. Many parents do this naturally. "Now Patsy, where did you get that knife? Give the knife to mummy. Give mummy the knife. There's a good girl." (Aitchison, 1996).

As mentioned in relation to the Input Hypothesis, another way of describing one of the essential factors that lead to L2 acquisition is exposure to comprehensible input. That is, in order to make the language learning experience as meaningful as possible, teachers need to adapt the language they use to talk to their pupils in such a way that it becomes comprehensible. Guides or teachers, like other adults speaking to young children, intuitively adapt their speech to use words the child is familiar with and help them understand their message. We modify our speech, not necessarily simplifying the words and expressions, but by elaborating, using gestures, slowing down our rate of speech, and providing additional contextual cues (referring to what the child has just witnessed, pointing, repeating what might be more complex etc.). Adults also consistently check in with the child to ensure they understand us; and in response to children's talk, we use recasting - saying their message back to them in a more complete way.

As children progress, their oral interaction will gradually include longer phrases and less memorised chunks. Part of this process will mean they may use non-standard grammar more often, as they produce language more spontaneously. This non-standard grammar can be misunderstood as problematic when contrasted with language that seems accurate but is used within common, repeated contexts. It is important to value that grammar errors can indicate the children are progressing, and at the same time, help the educator find new learning goals.

The ability to talk for longer, and about increasingly wider ranges of topics, will lead to children's interest in presenting their work out loud to an audience. They can participate in presenting to smaller or larger peer groups. This will be an opportunity for peer assessment; by listening and thinking about how well

a classmate speaks, a child will also experience new learning opportunities. There are different schemes and ways for organising peer feedback, we provide a few examples here.

In Montessori schools, working in small groups is a common arrangement. Educators can establish guidelines for L2 use in these work groups and children can be guided to use conversation to build knowledge. The "Thinking Together" Framework shows suggestions along these lines, providing checklists for children to strengthen their awareness and ability to converse constructively by doing peer or self-assessments in their groups.

Pause and reflect

- How do you currently create multisensory experiences to engage your students in learning a second language?
- What new multisensory strategies could you implement?
- In what ways can you support children's emotional comfort and curiosity in trying out their spoken language skills during lessons?
- What methods do you use to provide comprehensible input?
- How can you adapt your communication style to better support language understanding?

3. Learning written language

3.1. Literacy skills transferred across languages

Whichever language the child first develops literacy in, a range of concepts and abilities can naturally be transferred to additional languages through what is known as cross-linguistic transfer. There are four major kinds of literacy abilities a child may only need to acquire once that can then be directly accessed and applied to new languages.

- Transfer of conceptual knowledge (e.g. the concept of number or of life cycle).
- Transfer of specific elements of language (knowing the meaning of tele- as in television, in several languages).
- Transfer of phonological awareness, recognition that words are made up of smaller units and individual sounds, necessary to the decoding skills for

reading.

- Transfer of metalinguistic and metacognitive strategies like using context in addition to decoding for reading comprehension, strategies for self-regulation and memorising, repetition to develop mastery, graphic organisers for summing up or planning texts.

This natural transfer allows children to effectively use learning materials that are available to them in both their first and second language. If educators dedicate time to talking about and raising awareness of these connections, learners may gain the confidence and interest needed to stimulate engagement and motivate further exploration, practise and use of the second language.

Readers fully comprehend when they activate processes that include:

- **Literal** comprehension, accessing and retrieving explicitly expressed information;
- **Inferential** comprehension, reading between the lines and using clues to conclude what the author intends to convey;
- **Evaluative** or **interpretive comprehension** involves reflection on the message expressed in the text and its implications, the theme and the author's intentions, in addition to judging the quality and reliability of the message.

In the Montessori approach, reading with the full range of comprehension processes is called "total reading". In Maria Montessori's description, the comprehension processes considered in current assessment frameworks, mentioned previously, were known as mechanical, interpretive and appreciative reading. That is, Montessori contemplated that the child needs to develop decoding, inferential comprehension and evaluative comprehension.

3.2. Skill building - mechanical to to appreciative

Montessori proposed that children develop literacy through the specific learning sequence they follow with purposefully designed materials in Children's House. A carefully designed scheme of work leads the child from physical preparation for writing to grasping the concept of writing as meaning-making. The materials for this process include wooden cylinders, metal geometric shapes for tracing, and botanic shapes for tracing;

sandpaper letters that children pronounce the sound of while tracing the shape; the moveable alphabet, and others. This work all takes place before children begin reading; when they are ready for reading, their grasp of the alphabetic principle and of phonics has been firmly established.

Moving on from the initial stages of reading words and phrases, learners' reading comprehension involves integrating a complex variety of abilities: phonemic awareness, reading words automatically with understanding, fluency, making sense of text, knowing meanings of individual vocabulary words, and applying this knowledge and these skills in both reading and writing. All these form part of what children should be developing.

3.3. Diagnostic evaluation

If difficulties arise, children will need the help of well-prepared educators who can identify what specific areas are involved. Regular assessments, through which each child's progress is observed over a school year, are crucial to understanding individual needs. These assessments become especially relevant in the face of challenges in reading and writing, to detect specific areas of difficulty and ensure their successful development by sensitively providing appropriate help. This can mitigate the risk of learners avoiding what they find hard, which may be precisely where practice and guidance could prove most worthwhile.

3.4. Executive functions for reading

Total reading, in the Montessori perspective, relies on executive function: based on paying full attention and agility in applying cognitive resources, executive function leads us to focus our mental energy and use it with full efficiency, noticing what is relevant and suppressing attention to what is not. Independent, self-regulated behaviours are part of executive function. They are key values of the Montessori approach and essential to reading effectively. This is because fully developed literacy means that we efficiently use code-based and meaning-based strategies like knowing "when and how to focus attention, how to intentionally use a variety of strategies to read and write unfamiliar words, and how to monitor and regulate the meaning of text." (ILA, 2019, p. 2)

Children use executive function when reading informative texts by employing strategies that focus on various text features: graphic elements (tables,

sidebars), organisational tools (index, table of contents), and print features (headings, subheadings, italics, and captions). By recognising how these features organise text structure, differentiate key concepts from supporting details, and engage readers' attention, children develop critical thinking skills and the ability to evaluate textual reliability. Skimming and scanning are essential basic strategies for effectively using informative texts. However, these strategies can be more challenging to apply in a second language due to limited vocabulary, so educators can enhance children's bilingual literacy through specific lessons that explicitly teach these skills. These strategies are particularly relevant as they help manage on-screen and online reading effectively—an increasingly fundamental ability as children grow and need to engage with electronic media critically.

Pause and reflect

- How do you currently support cross-lingual transfer in your classroom?
- What strategies could you implement to enhance this process for your students?
- How do you integrate executive function skills into your literacy lessons/presentations?
- What specific strategies do you teach to help students navigate and comprehend informational texts in a second language?

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Contents

1. Language learner autonomy: bilingual development, the Montessori way

2. References

Key takeaways

- **Learner autonomy** drives bilingual development.
- Logbooks and posters aid **progress tracking**.
- **Peer discussions and group work** promote shared learning and strengthen language skills.
- **Documentation** builds metacognitive skills. Reflecting on and tracking progress helps students make informed decisions about their learning.
- The **first language aids understanding** and problem-solving, particularly in the early stages of language acquisition.

Introduction

In a Montessori classroom, fostering language learner autonomy is key to promoting bilingual development. This approach empowers students to take control of their language learning by setting their own goals and choosing how to achieve them. By aligning with Montessori's emphasis on self-directed learning, this method encourages students to engage in meaningful language activities while documenting their progress through tools like logbooks and posters. The teacher's role is to guide and support the learners' decisions, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities to practice the target language in context. This approach not only promotes fluency in a second language but also strengthens metacognitive skills, helping students reflect on their learning process and set new goals. In this way, learners develop greater independence, confidence, and lifelong skills that extend beyond language acquisition.

1. Language learner autonomy: bilingual development the Montessori way

Involving each student and their families in working with the language learning objectives identified by learners themselves, is closely tied to the Montessori principle which states that learning and well-being are improved when people have a sense of control over their own lives. This principle, as well as the involvement of any language learner in setting their own learning goals, are fundamental in implementing a successful bilingual education program, in a Montessori school or any other educational approach.

Following authors David Little, Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhousen (2017), an effective teacher will focus on guiding the learner to use their pre-existing capacity for autonomous learning, engaging their agency for language learning. This takes place when learners decide what and how to learn and the teacher offers them a range of appropriate options to choose from as activities for working towards those objectives. These authors advocate for learner autonomy as a central pillar of achieving fluency and competence in a second or additional language. Their ideas are similar to a substantial body of other scientific findings about child development, cognition and learning that have come to light through research based on diverse frameworks, theories and perspectives - fully aligned with Maria Montessori's ideas,

principles and pedagogical guidelines. Publications about this approach focus on elementary-aged learners, adolescents or adults. Birgitta Berger has used this approach to additional language learning in her Montessori elementary classroom in Munich, Germany.

In the autonomous language learner classroom, the teacher can begin the school year by telling the children about a simplified version of the language curriculum and its objectives for their age group or educational stage. They can brainstorm together about the activities that will help achieve progress towards the objectives, and identify interim steps that will eventually lead to them being met. The teacher uses two essential tools for mediating the target language (providing the language in alternative modes to make it understandable) for the learners and for them to mediate it for themselves: logbooks and posters (Little, 2020).

The logbook is a plain notebook for each student to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their learning. Providing each learner with a picture dictionary is also recommended. Learners take note of the timing and content of their lessons, words and phrases to remember and plan homework. Each learner's book assists them along their learning journey. In this approach, the learner's ownership of the logbook is crucial. Learners must feel that they make decisions about what is in their logbook. When they decide what to learn next, they record the decision in the book and record a plan to achieve that learning. The educator will check it with them periodically to support the learner's reflections about progress and discuss how to use the book effectively. Ultimately, the learners are responsible for using it.

The posters are a means for the teacher to assist the whole class, by providing the words and expressions they need, for example for setting goals, their lesson agenda, for evaluating their learning, reasons for learning a foreign language, or different ways to learn vocabulary. Later the learners will create posters for group work, assigning roles, or keeping track of progress. Posters are preferred, over a blackboard/whiteboard, because of their more permanent accessibility (they don't get erased) remaining visible to students who can decide when they are needed.

For younger children, in lower primary years, who are not yet ready to write in the target language, documentation of the learning progress may require more help from adults, for instance in the form of photos, which serve similar purposes to those of writing. Other documentation options might include using the picture dictionary as support for a child to keep track of words

already learnt and words they don't know how to say yet. Whichever method is chosen, including as part of the second/ additional language learning process, the development of documenting one's progress is a valuable pedagogical practice. The fact that the learner takes on the responsibility of maintaining a clear picture of their progress leads to a range of benefits not only for their language development but also for other learning areas and as a general life skill.

> **Madrid Montessori** is a school in Spain where children experience immersion in English (the target language) from the moment they start attending. Here, a highly experienced bilingual guide, Florencia Ugalde, has devised a way to involve children of different ages in collaborative autonomous learning where they assist each other in decision-making about learning goals and activities. Even before reaching elementary school ages, younger children who are not yet reading fluently or writing in any language, one of the areas of focus is beginning reading and vocabulary building with miniature objects. A miniature farm, always in popular demand among children, is one of the learning materials with which they can work when they can name animals and other farm terms. To acquire the vocabulary they use phonetic object boxes with mini objects; these boxes prepare the children for working with the farmhouse and are often selected by the pupils during their work cycles. (To find out more watch Community Conversations Specialized Language Activities in 3-6 Classroom: Faithful to Montessori with Florencia Ugalde.)

Thus, young children work with the phonetic object boxes, pursuing the goal of knowing all the words, after which they may ask for new words. When these younger children already know all the words from a box, older children help the guide decide which words to replace and which new words to add, based on the design criteria for this learning material. All this builds up to the point at which children have the chance to use their words when they realise - in agreement with the guide - that they know enough terms for working with the mini farm. This special preparation in the English language expressions needed to enable children to work appropriately with a specific Montessori material is an original adaptation Florencia devised to scaffold their second language competence.

With this scaffolding, the children move on to using vocabulary that they have been building up to make phrases when they work with the farm. The guide

presents this material and helps her students attentively with the language connected to its use, after which children can access it for new activities, leading to ample opportunities for practising the language in context (connected to the material, the farmhouse - alongside all the elements that go with it like animals, plants, equipment, features of nature and so on). This type of independent access to learning materials has been proven to have a strong impact on early childhood additional language learning, even in programs that only offer a few hours of the language per week, as documented by Robinson, Morao, and Kung (2015). Given the opportunity, young children choose to use the materials and, importantly, to do so in the language in which the materials were presented to them.

To return to our explanation of the autonomous language learner's involvement in documenting their learning, it is worth highlighting how this involvement also leads to developing metacognition. Metacognitive skills enable people to reflect on what they already know not simply what they need to learn next, and to make conscious decisions about reaching new learning goals. So by documenting our learning, we also become involved in the process of goal-setting, as we realise or decide what to learn next. In addition, to empower pupils for autonomous learning, they should be guided to choose adequate learning activities connected to their goals. Here, the educator's role is important as a provider of the materials and suggestions for appropriate activities in response to their pupils' needs, also orienting the learners towards the most effective options when they decide on learning goals and activities, ensuring they are exposed to the target language, establishing and maintaining it as the main means of communication during lesson or class times.

To sum up, providing second/additional language education following a learner autonomy-focused approach consists of:

- basing the learning process upon the child's full involvement in decision-making about their overall objectives
- involving children in setting shorter-term goals that lead towards the overall goals;
- involving children in deciding about the learning activities they will do
- enabling learner agency over their own learning processes with a systematic method of documenting learning: the logbook

In addition, the learner autonomy-focused approach proposed by Little, Dam and Legenhausen (2017) includes collaboration among learners as an essential component. They suggest arranging for this collaboration in "together sessions", where the educator leads a discussion for deciding on learning goals and making plans for learners to work together using the ideas for activities (games, role-plays, listening tasks, work with different learning materials) offered by the teacher.

As explained by Little, children who receive this type of language education eventually find it beneficial for different life skills. Little quotes the following reflection of a child who had attended English classes following the learner autonomy-focused approach:

> *I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our „together" session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent.* (Little, 2020, n.p.)

This student's remarks show how the autonomy classroom can "create continuities between learning at school and living one's life outside the classroom (....) have an impact on general attitudes and behaviour (...) and contribute to personal development and self-esteem" (Little, 2020, n.p.); the student mentions using strategies from their English lessons to get things done at home and their feeling of progress in being able to start a conversation (regardless of whether it is in their home language or English) and of greater independence.

This description of how to develop an autonomy-focused approach to second language learning may only seem useful for older children but has been used in a wide range of contexts with very young children. The principles are maintained and the specific practices adapted to the children's developmental stage.

To recapitulate, the central pillars of the autonomy classroom are:

- shared goal-setting (decision-making about what to learn and how to improve), guided by the teacher or educator but involving the learners
- learners' decision-making about more specific goals and how to achieve them, i.e. what activities they will do, based on what they need/hope to achieve
- educators providing both spoken and written language input in different forms, including especially visual resources with reminders of expressions, activity options, goals and reasons for learning English, etc.
- educators firmly establishing a culture of communication in the L2 during the lesson/class times and activities
- holding regular "together times", assemblies or group discussions for organising learning, sharing what learners are doing and planning
- learner involvement in documenting their progress and using the information about what they know and can do to set new goals and choose appropriate activities to reach them (e.g. with individual learner logbooks)

Based on these central concepts and practices, as Little (2020) explains, learners play three simultaneous roles:

- students are **communicators**, they use the target language to express and understand messages connected to real life, gradually developing their communicative skills;
- students are **experimenters** with the target language, as they acquire explicit knowledge about the language (words, word order in phrases, word classes (noun,verb…), how to ask questions, how to express things more formally or more casually, etc.);
- students are **intentional learners**, as they become aware of how to do language learning and what it consists of.

To conclude this information about autonomy in the classroom, we should also consider the use of the learner's first language. This approach is consistent with learner-centred educational perspectives, entailing that learning builds upon our previous knowledge and competences; the language(s) a person speaks already form part of the prior knowledge on which they base their learning of new languages. Therefore, the language educator understands that the mother tongue is the language of thought for the learners on which

the new language is built as an "alternative code".

(The teacher) communicates with her learners in the target language, using mime, gesture and other visual supports to get her message across, and she makes sure that all learning activity has as its goal the production of the target language in speech or writing. But she translates words or phrases into the target language on demand, and allows her learners to use their mother tongue, especially in the early stages, in order to solve problems that arise in pair or group work. (Little, 2020, n.p.).

This means we use the L2 to teach and at the same time, we are responsive to children's questions in any language. If the children ask how to say something in their L1 of course, we answer them. The teacher scaffolds the learners' attempts to speak the target language in the way parents help toddlers express themselves in their mother tongue.

Pause and reflect

- How can I involve my students in setting their own language learning goals?
- What impact do I think this would have on their motivation and autonomy?
- What strategies can I use to support my students in tracking their progress?
- In what ways can I help my students to develop metacognitive skills, such as reflecting on their learning progress and setting new goals based on their achievements?
- How do I incorporate students' first language as a resource in the language learning process?

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Understanding language learning

2.6. Stages in children's additional language acquisition

Contents

Key takeaways

- Each child's development in L2 follows a **unique path**, influenced by individual, environmental, and social factors.
- Children **immersed** in a second language early may acquire it almost as a second mother tongue.
- Language acquisition progresses through **stages**: pre-production (silent period), early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency.
- Educators must **recognise the variability** in language learning progress and provide tailored support

Introduction

In this section, we explore the stages of second language acquisition that children typically undergo as they develop proficiency in an additional language at school. While the pace of progression varies due to individual differences and external factors, certain common milestones can be identified. Early exposure to a second language—such as through immersion in Montessori environments—can significantly influence a child's linguistic development, with younger children potentially acquiring the language more naturally. In contrast, older learners, especially those who begin learning at elementary school, may face greater challenges in acquiring the language and require more sustained effort. Drawing from established research by Hill and Flynn (2006) and Krashen and Terrell (1983), this section outlines the typical stages of language acquisition, from the silent "pre-production" stage to advanced fluency, offering insights and strategies to support learners at each stage.

1. Stages in children's additional language acquisition

In this section, we describe the stages that have been observed over decades of research that children follow when developing an additional language at school. The stages can develop at very different rates, depending on individual and external conditions that may affect each child. In addition, each individual has their own personality and way of being and learning, despite all external factors or efforts to influence them. This is the case even within the relatively consistent environment shared by siblings in a family. When we attempt to describe the development of children in an additional language who start at different ages, with different mother tongues, in different kinds of families and social environments, with diverse kinds of support or circumstances that may spark or hinder development, the potential to offer accurate generalisations about how much time they might require to reach a subsequent stage decreases sharply.

Despite the caveats just mentioned, this section will offer some general information about children's typical development in an additional language. An essential observation to make is that the child's progress will be substantially impacted by their early childhood experiences, if they have had any, with the target language. The infant and toddler periods have been

considered critical (following, e.g. Lenneberg, 1969) for language development; other authors describe these crucial timeframes as sensitive periods for language because there are cases in which individuals gain a practically equal proficiency in an additional language that they learn later in life (for more information see section 2.1. Setting the stage: language acquisition and development). Children who have experienced immersion in the target language from very early on, such as those who attend Montessori English immersion in Nido, Toddler or Children's House, are exposed to the L2 practically as a second mother tongue and can develop bilingually. However, those who begin at elementary have surpassed the sensitive periods and therefore will acquire the target language in a quite different way, as a second (or additional) language, requiring much more conscious effort and attention over the following years.

Since this Field Guide is intended mainly for professionals and families involved in elementary schooling, a developmental sequence of stages is provided below. These can orient educators and families on the milestones that a child who begins their exposure to the target language around age 6 can be expected to reach during the elementary years.

This well-known sequence of child second/additional language development was established by Hill and Flynn (2006), based on the original formulation by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell in the book The Natural Approach (1983).

1.1. Pre-production

During this stage, children (or older learners) have been observed to go through a silent period, during which they are already making progress in recognising words and phrases they hear in context. Language development takes place during this silent period but the child may only show development by - sometimes - responding physically to the additional language. This is a stage that can be expected to last until the child has acquired about 500 words.

If the child's experience with an L2 or additional language begins with elementary school, a family may not observe the child using it until well into the second stage, early production. In the Bilingual Montessori project's study on good practices, we asked parents whose children began English at the start of elementary about their observations on the children's progression. Some families reported that even after 3 years of school English immersion

their child had not yet produced English spontaneously; all in all, the families reported having heard their children begin using this additional language between 6 months and 3 years of exposure (the survey included Spanish-speaking children attending Cordoba Educate for Life Montessori in Spain). Based on these observations, it can be expected that at some point during the second year of immersion in an additional language (particularly English, thanks to its relatively frequent presence in games, on television, advertisements and so on throughout many societies) that is not used regularly in the child's community outside of school, their families are likely to begin hearing them occasionally saying an expression or notice them using the additional language in some way.

Like in other areas of child development, language learning progress can show major variation across individuals. A concept that one child takes a few days to gain ability in may take another child significantly longer to acquire. With L2 development, although educators need to be aware of possible signs of learning difficulties that may require intervention to support a child, accepting that individuals can differ very widely is essential, as well as having the ability to communicate to parents about these facts. At the same time, if a child develops more slowly in the L2 than their peers, educators should be vigilant that this may signal an issue that requires their attention, guidance and encouragement, whether of an emotional or more academic nature.

Pre-production

Characteristics of learner language

- up to 500 words of receptive vocabulary
- may repeat what is heard but not producing the language
- attentive listening
- possibly copying written words
- need for, and enjoyment of, plenty of repetition

Educator strategies

- focus on strengthening listening comprehension (e.g. with physical response games) and receptive vocabulary
- engage learners with action songs, rhymes and chants, exposing them to a range of situations where they enjoy experiencing the language
- children will respond to pictures, visuals, gestures and movements to show understanding

1.2. Early production

By the time a learner knows around 1,000 words in their additional language, it is expected they begin to spontaneously express themselves using some of those words, and be able to combine pairs or more words to convey messages. At this stage, as shown in the table below, many kinds of activities and games can be enjoyed in the additional language and interest in the written language can also be expected to increase. After around 3 years of school immersion, those children who began learning the L2 in elementary are likely to enter the early production stage.

Early production

Characteristics of learner language

- receptive and active vocabulary of about 1,000 words
- begin to speak in 1 or 2-word phrases
- may memorise chunks or formulas, without being sure of the meaning
- can give short answers to questions when helped by support using pictures and gestures
- may enjoy reading simple books with predictable text
- will expand their vocabulary using resources such as picture cards, naming objects and actions

Educator strategies

- use realia and interesting resources to present vocabulary
- begin fostering writing with labels, short sentence frames and vocabulary recording systems
- ask yes/no and "or" questions

- read aloud and converse about stories and illustrated texts

Pause and reflect

- How do you currently support children in your classroom who are transitioning from receptive vocabulary to producing their first words in the second language?
- What activities can you introduce to encourage learners at the early production stage to express themselves more spontaneously in the target language?
- In what ways do you foster an environment where children feel comfortable experimenting with new words and phrases?

1.3. Speech emergence

With a fairly solid basis of word knowledge, around 3,000 words, and experience in the school immersion setting, children's second language speech begins to develop noticeably. They have been hearing and probably reading the language over time and have become familiar with its sounds and structure, although probably in a mostly unconscious way. Now children can not only respond to questions but also explain their answers. They may produce simple sentences, and if an educator helps them by recasting the child's message, expanding it with more vocabulary. For instance, if the child has said or written "I can see my cat" the adult reads this out and adds "Yes, you can see the grey cat" the child will benefit from hearing their own words expanded and may use this help in saying or writing a similar statement.

Speech emergence

Characteristics of learner language

- active vocabulary of 3,000 words
- can communicate with short sentences and simple phrases
- can follow directions with two steps
- work on vocabulary by matching words to definitions
- learn terminology of different content areas (botany, geography, biology, history, etc.)

- can ask simple questions,
- can understand simple stories
- complete graphic organisers with word banks
- write brief stories connected to personal experience, journals and illustrated riddles

Educator strategies

- develop collaborative/guided writing through interaction
- provide chances to represent meaning across modes (visual, gestural, oracy, written)
- interaction situations (pairs, small/whole group)

Pause and reflect

- How do you assess whether a student has reached the speech emergence stage?
- What strategies do you use to encourage them to express themselves in more complete sentences?
- How can you create opportunities for students to explain their thoughts and ideas in simple sentences, both verbally and in writing?
- In what ways do you balance providing support (such as recasting) with giving students the freedom to express themselves independently in the target language?
- How do you track and celebrate the language progress of children as they transition from responding to questions to explaining their ideas in the additional language?

1.4. Intermediate fluency

An intermediate level of proficiency in an additional language is enough to be able to successfully use the language for practical daily situations.

Intermediate fluency

Characteristics of learner language

- 6,000-word vocabulary

- begin to use more complex sentences
- willing to share opinions and thoughts
- can learn in content areas through English but may use L1 to deepen understanding
- are capable of asking questions to clarify what they do not understand
- writing will still show mistakes as they continue to develop grammar and vocabulary
- can highlight important information in a text
- can write personal stories, journals
- understand teacher explanations
- can identify main ideas when listening/reading
- can explain some word meanings

Educator strategies

- ensure participation in class interactions by encouraging question-asking and providing "wait-time" for responses.
- offer guided reading, discussion /production
- opportunities for visual, written and multimodal text composition.
- encourage children to synthesise what they are learning through English

Pause and reflect

- How do you support students in using their intermediate language skills for practical, everyday communication in the classroom?
- How do you balance the need for students to refine their grammar and vocabulary with encouraging them to use the language for meaningful interactions?
- In what ways can you create opportunities for students to apply their intermediate language skills in real-world contexts beyond the classroom?

1.5. Advanced fluency

Once a child has reached advanced fluency, they are proficient in the L2 and capable of communicating effectively in many different kinds of situations, even unfamiliar ones. In the same way that everybody does,

children who develop advanced fluency can and will continue to expand their language abilities over time, especially in literacies, interaction and mediation.

Advanced fluency

Characteristics of learner language

- Students can use English in many ways similar to a native-speaker child: discuss familiar & unfamiliar topics, produce extended talk/writing with several connected sentences; and identify underlying ideas, supporting details + main ideas.
- Students need to continue reading, especially in content areas; to develop learning strategies and study skills and academic language.

Educator strategies

- introduce increasingly complex reading and writing tasks in different genres;
- provide opportunities for spontaneous & planned, spoken & written uses of language: debates, presentations, transmedia texts and inquiry using multiple sources.

Pause and reflect

- How do you provide opportunities for students to use their advanced fluency in a variety of classroom situations, including unfamiliar contexts?
- In what ways can you challenge students to continue developing their language abilities?
- What techniques do you use to encourage students to reflect on their language growth and set new goals for further development?
- How do you differentiate your teaching to support students at different levels of fluency, while promoting growth for those at an advanced level?

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Understanding language learning

Contents

Key takeaways

- The **CEFR** provides guidelines for L2 curricula and assessments, helping teachers set learner-centred goals and track progress through descriptors.
- The **action-oriented approach** emphasises real-world tasks and learner agency, promoting collaboration and meaningful language use.
- **Can-do statements** allow learners to self-assess their abilities and fostering motivation.
- **Effective assessment** recognises each child's unique path, values the first language (L1), and focuses on language use, not just accuracy.

Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an essential tool in the field of second language (L2) acquisition, providing a comprehensive set of guidelines for language teaching, learning, and assessment. Developed by the Council of Europe, the CEFR helps educators establish clear, learner-centred objectives and monitor progress through descriptors that highlight what learners can do at different proficiency levels. The framework's action-oriented approach encourages real-world language use and learner agency, promoting collaboration and task-based learning. This text focuses on how the CEFR can support children's L2 development, with a particular emphasis on its application in Montessori environments. It explores key concepts like the use of Can-Do statements for self-assessment, strategies for making learning visible, and addressing challenges in assessment, all while ensuring that the first language (L1) is acknowledged as an integral part of the language learning process..

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR)

The CEFR, also known as the Framework, is a document developed by experts at the Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe. It offers a common basis for L2 program designs and a large set of guidelines for language curricula and assessments. Also, importantly, the CEFR describes what learners do to effectively use a language to communicate at different levels of proficiency.

Since the Framework lays out a thoughtfully designed basis for understanding what learners can do as they progress in an L2, it is ideal for identifying what to expect and how to establish adequate learning objectives, as well as how to assess learning in ways that are constructive and learner centred. The original Framework was published in 2001, and in 2022 a Companion Volume was published; in this Field Guide, we mainly refer to the updated companion volume. These documents are used on a widespread basis for school/educational curricula across Europe, for designing and organising the content of L2 learning materials, including textbooks by the most prominent publishers and for L2 assessments by well-known commercial examining corporations and certification bodies, like Cambridge ESOL.

1.1. The action-oriented approach

The CEFR considers language development and learning to mean building up the range of situations where the learner is able to do things using the L2. It is based on what is called the action-oriented approach, which sees the learning process as involvement in tasks that are part of real world situations, beyond classrooms, and emphasises learner agency (see the examples listed below). In this approach, learning develops in scenarios, situations where learners use all the language skills and modes of communication, which lead to collaboration among learners to produce an artifact, performance or presentation in the L2. This approach proposes that learners have chances to choose topics and ways to work, using their agency to make these decisions. For these reasons, it is the kind of approach that is very much compatible with Montessori principles. You can find out all about this approach, access videos of workshops and other resources at this link.

The CEFR is useful for teachers because it offers descriptors, that is, phrases describing learners' abilities, showing what can be expected at all the levels of development of the L2. Teachers can select sets of descriptors that are relevant to their students, identifying the ones that suggest what the learners will (soon) become able to do, and use them as learning objectives.

For each objective, specific language that is useful can be planned as a basis for identifying examples of words, phrases and grammatical constructions the learners will need to understand and/or produce. This will allow teachers to keep track of the learners' progress and guide them to increase their command of the L2 over a work cycle, a longer unit of work, a school term, a year or longer periods, up to the end of the school stage they are in. For instance, for the A1 comprehension descriptor listed below, the everyday situations where the children may be exposed to, or encouraged to use, English might include lunchtime at school. Teachers can consider (linking to the Montessori Grace and Courtesy curriculum strand) expressions for offering, asking for food, tableware, asking to be excused from the table, etc.: May I have the/some… / Would you like some… / Can you pass the… / Shall I pour / cut / pass… / That's enough, thanks…Offering children practice and materials for understanding and rehearsing these expressions, including grammar analysis, will provide them with the resources to reach the learning objective (understanding) as well as, eventually, surpassing just understanding as they become confident enough to participate in using the relevant L2 expressions in interaction at the table.

Recent publications by the European Commission provide adaptations of the original descriptors that are adjusted for use with children and can be found here: Bank of supplementary descriptors and, specifically, the document of sample descriptors for young learners Collated representative samples descriptors young learners.

Below, we show a few examples of the CEFR descriptors adapted for child L2 learners of 7 to 10 years of age. This information is helpful when we need to establish the learning aims or objectives for children learning an L2. It is validated, well-researched, and designed based on combining the view of how learners develop L2 abilities with the kinds of needs and purposes that learners usually have for using the L2 in real life. A full set of benchmarks, adapted from the CEFR for elementary school children and developed for newcomer pupils in Ireland, is available at The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (accessed December 2024). These benchmarks can serve as guidelines for school objectives for school years or stages and are applicable to diverse situations of child additional language learning.

Examples of descriptors from the CEFR

> LISTENING COMPREHENSION
>
> - Pre A1. Can recognise everyday, familiar words, provided they are delivered clearly and slowly in a clearly defined, familiar, everyday context.
> - A1. Can understand words and short sentences when listening to a simple conversation (e.g. between a customer and a salesperson in a shop), provided that people talk very slowly and very clearly.
>
> READING CORRESPONDENCE
>
> - A1. Can recognise times and places in very simple notes and text messages from friends or colleagues, for example 'Back at 4 o'clock' or 'In the meeting room,' provided there are no abbreviations.

A big advantage of using the CEFR descriptors is that they frame learning in a positive way, and in terms of what the learner can do so that we can assess learning not by noting what mistakes or difficulties learners have, but instead, by what they are already achieving. Importantly, the descriptors refer to real-world situations where we use language to do things so that learning is framed as meaningful and applicable in real contexts of communication.

The approach that the CEFR supports is, therefore, aligned with some of the Montessori principles highlighted by Lillard (2007, p.29): Learning situated in meaningful contexts is often deeper and richer than learning in abstract contexts. / Collaborative arrangements can be very conducive to learning. That is, as already mentioned, the CEFR proposes descriptors that situate achievement in language learning in real-world, meaningful concepts. And in addition, this framework proposes to provide learners with tasks that they can work on in collaboration so that they develop through using the L2 with classmates to create an artifact, presentation or performance.

Pause and reflect

- How can you design classroom activities that align with the action-oriented approach, enabling students to use the L2 in real-world situations?
- Reflect on your current practices for assessing L2 learners. How might you incorporate the CEFR descriptors to focus on what students can already do, rather than their mistakes or challenges?
- Considering Montessori's emphasis on meaningful, context-based learning, how could you create opportunities for students to practice language in contexts that are personally relevant and collaborative?
- In what ways can you adapt the CEFR's descriptors for young learners to fit the specific needs and interests of your students?
- How do you incorporate CEFR learning objectives and outcomes into your lesson/presentation planning?
- How can you integrate Grace and Courtesy lessons with language learning goals to provide students with opportunities to practice real-life interactions in the L2, such as polite requests and conversational exchanges?

2. The can-do statements

From the descriptors that we explained and gave examples of in the previous section, The statements name the abilities of the CEFR descriptors in the form of statements beginning with "I can…", so that learners can use them for self-assessment and check their progress.

Table 2. Examples of can-do statements for young learners (age 7-10). (Council of Europe, 2018)

> LISTENING COMPREHENSION
>
> Pre A1
>
> - I can understand the important words in a song or rhyme.
> - I can understand the names of the clothes I wear to school and the food that I eat in school.
>
> A1
>
> - I can understand very short conversations when people speak slowly and clearly.
>
> READING CORRESPONDENCE
>
> A1.
>
> - I can understand simple short messages written by the teacher or my friend (e.g. "I am in the library.", "I'll be back in an hour.", etc.).

As we will show in section 3.8 of this field guide, Assessment in L2 learning, participation in assessment is a relevant part of the learning process for children, especially as they grow and develop self-awareness. In addition, assessment is fundamental to make it possible for educators to responsibly oversee children's learning and ensure that they receive support when needed in and for the specific challenges that each child may face.

So, as suggested in the example provided in section 3.4 Building literacy part 1: spoken communication, 4.2. Daily routines, using the CEFR, teachers can access an extensive toolkit for identifying the information about L2 development that they will need to clearly define learning goals for their students. Once the long term objectives are set - for instance, the students are expected, by the end of elementary, to have an intermediate (B1) command of the L2 - the pathway that will lead them to this endpoint can be laid out. An adequate number of hours of exposure and guided work using the L2 will

need to be planned for, and there will need to be a clearly structured program set up, providing well organised provision for a trajectory in which children reach A1 and A2 levels over the previous years of elementary.

2.1. Process and progress. Making learning visible

During the elementary stage, a core tendency that children show as part of their development through the Reasoning Mind period is the need to know reasons for what they learn and for how things are done. In line with this need is also the thirst for knowing the results of their efforts and having tangible evidence of their progress, including in the area of L2 learning. A good practice related to these needs is to use a range of strategies to make learning visible, in other words, to compile evidence of the learning process followed and of the progress that learners make. The concept of educational documentation, developed in the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, offers valuable guidelines for making learning visible (in consonance with the learner autonomy approach - see section 2.5. Expectations for second language learning). This concept has been influential to other educational initiatives, including an impactful project developed by Harvard Graduate School of Education called, precisely, "Making Learning Visible".

The idea behind these strategies and projects is that learning becomes more effective when people make it explicit, visible, and reflective. In the context of children's acquisition of an L2, this approach can transform the learning experience by focusing on how language is used and acquired rather than just the final results. For instance, if children use materials like the moveable alphabet for working on L2 spelling, or sentences from a text divided up into individual words to reorder, the different combinations that they come up with can be documented and brought up in a group conversation the teacher might lead in order to identify challenges that the learners have been facing, talk about what was difficult to grasp and the reasons why some combinations work to make a correct word or phrase but others do not.

Learning journals, commonly used in Montessori environments, are a simple option for applying a process-based view and keeping records of the learning process, which can be brought into the different types of assessment that we use (See section 3.8. Assessment in L2 learning). But many additional ways to enrich educational documentation are worth considering: photos, collaborative panels where pieces of evidence are posted (these can be on bulletin boards, easel pads, etc.), audio recordings, scrapbooks with notes,

texts, sets of learner-produced vocabulary cards and the like.

Using strategies from the Making Learning Visible viewpoint strengthens the focus on the process of acquiring mastery and competence in using the L2 to communicate, as opposed to traditional assessments, which often emphasise correctness and outcomes, so that they inhibit risk-taking and creativity in language use. These methods capture not just what children know but how they arrive at their understanding so that assessment is a formative and integral part of the learning process. They can also be perfectly compatible with preparing for external assessments such as a Cambridge exam as, for instance, practice with the kinds of questions and tasks that form part of these exams can be built into the range of practice work offered to learners. As stated by Krechevsky et al. (2013, p. 58), "Pictures, quotes, student work, video, audio recordings, and the like offer glimpses into the complexity of learning and learners. When these representations of learning are shared publicly, they can contribute to building collective knowledge and provide a memory for the group."

For the L2 learning process, children won't be able to discuss and reflect on the documentation using the L2 from the start, but if the practices are done routinely, over time, they will gradually progress in being able to join conversations about the learning process through the target language. In any case, the goal of these practices is not to show proficiency in the L2, but to reflect on how progress is built up and how we learn, which can justifiably be carried out using the learners' preferred forms of expression and chosen language(s).

We can apply visible learning principles for assessment practices to encourage a child-centred approach to second-language acquisition. By documenting and reflecting on their learning, children gain insight into their progress, identify areas for improvement, and become active participants in their own education. Teachers, in turn, can use these insights to adjust planning and instruction to individual needs, and this way, ensure a supportive and responsive classroom environment. This dynamic interplay between visible learning and assessment is not only an advantage for L2 learning outcomes; it also helps to build and reinforce metacognitive skills, resilience, and intrinsic motivation to learn, aligned with Montessori principles.

3. Assessment troubleshooting

Assessing children's language development may bring up a range of unexpected challenges. Teachers' understanding of children's multilingual development is a fundamental basis for this kind of assessment. To correctly assess a child's language learning, adopting a framework like the CEFR entails overcoming the tendency to notice ways in which the learner's use of language forms is inaccurate. The focus must be placed, instead, on what the learner can produce in the L2 and the effective use of language (even if it is inaccurate) and other ways of communicating, such as body language, to get messages across successfully.

Meanwhile, another crucial purpose of assessment of children's language development is to accurately detect possible learning difficulties such as developmental language delay or dyslexia. Diagnostic assessments of these kinds require specific training and should be carried out by speech and language therapists. (See this link for more information about the detection of language development difficulties. While it refers to the context of bilingual learners in Scotland the information is applicable to children in other bi/multilingual learning contexts.)

The observations that follow are examples of other potential challenges that

can arise in assessing children's L2 development in Montessori settings.

3.1. Some children refuse to listen to or use the L2

As already highlighted in this Field Guide, to acquire an L2, children must not feel scared of making mistakes in the new language. An attitude towards errors as an essential part of learning must be developed, as a basis for lifelong learning.

If children react to the second language by refusing to interact, educators must uphold caring attitudes towards the children's learning and react to the content expressed in their attempts to use the L2, and not to the form as in the correct grammar or concision in word choice. This is so no matter how imperfect children's language use may appear, whether limited to one word or the use of only body language. Teachers need to avoid mistaken, perfectionist expectations and value positively, **any** progress in the children's development.

When implementing continuous assessment, the adult should try to keep track of difficulties they observe and then incorporate work on the forms that are challenging on a separate occasion. This means that children can produce the L2 without interruption for corrections by teachers or other adults. Their success in making messages that include any expressions in L2 is to be valued. After children participate in an L2 activity with a real and practical purpose, if the teacher has identified what the next steps can be for helping them communicate more effectively and offers interesting resources for the children to use for practice, the children will have interest in improving and using the resources for the practical purpose.

3.2. Need to assess children who do not yet produce the L2

Before beginning to produce the L2, children's comprehension can be assessed by observing their non-verbal responses, attitudes and interest towards situations where the L2 is used. Each individual may develop differently, some produce the L2 from when they are first exposed to it, whereas others may spend a long time gradually beginning to understand and becoming ready to produce the L2 and then suddenly use phrases and sentences; neither option is inherently better nor worse.

Recent studies on child language learning and multilingualism have highlighted the role of "language-based agency" as an area to consider in assessment. Adopting an ecological perspective on child development (see, for instance, Schwartz & Mazareeb, 2023), these authors consider the child

within their sociocultural environment, from the immediate surroundings, family, friends, classmates and teachers, to the wider school and social communities and how the child's interactions and relationships unfold across these groups, including the language(s) that form part of them. Language acquisition, from this perspective, is seen as part of the child's growth and development including their capacity to choose to (try to) use a particular language with particular people. As a consequence, assessment includes valuing children's language-based agency, acknowledging that making choices about who to speak or use a particular language with, and in which situations, is part of their competence.

3.3. Using the L1

As part of acquiring an L2 at school, it is essential that the children's first or previous languages are not banned or belittled. It is an advantage that the children already know (at least one) language, this forms part of the background knowledge that they use when developing a new language.

All adults must be aware that language is a resource for connecting people, emotionally and intellectually.

- When an adult is attending to a child's emotional needs, providing reassurance is more important than ensuring the use of the second language and the child should be allowed to use the language they are most comfortable with. The adult should ensure that the child realises they are being listened to and paid attention to, therefore may use phrases in the child's L1 for this purpose.
- When starting out with literacy in the child's second language, if the child needs to, recurring to the L1 is a positive strategy. Teachers can keep the purpose in mind of guiding the child towards switching to the L2 as soon as possible. This use of the L1 may be a priority in reaching the goal of the child's phonemic awareness and acquisition of the alphabetic principle, fundamental for progress with literacy in any of their languages.

Pause and reflect

- How can you incorporate "can-do" statements in your classroom to empower students to reflect on their L2 progress and set personal learning goals?
- How can you adjust your teaching methods to support students who are hesitant to use L2?

- How od you give them feedback that their attempts to communicate non-verbaly are very important on their way to fluency?
- Considering the diverse pace at which students begin to produce the L2, how can you design activities that are responsive to both active learners and those who are still primarily understanding the language?
- How can you foster a classroom environment that values students' first languages, ensuring they feel comfortable and supported in using their L1 when necessary, while gradually guiding them toward more frequent L2 use?

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5. Appendix 2.7.1.

Lillard's Nine principles of Montessori education

1. Movement and cognition are closely entwined, and movement can enhance thinking and learning.

2. Learning and well-being are improved when people have a sense of control over their lives.

3. The ability to direct one's attention in a sustained and concentrated way fosters an array of positive developments and is itself trainable.

4. People learn better when they are interested in what they are learning.

5. Tying extrinsic rewards to an activity, such as money for reading or high grades on tests, negatively impacts motivation to engage in that activity when the reward is withdrawn.

6. Collaborative arrangements can be very conducive to learning.

7. Learning situated in meaningful contexts is often deeper and richer than learning in abstract contexts.

8. Particular forms of adult interaction are associated with more optimal child outcomes

9. Order in the environment is beneficial to children.

Source:

Lillard, Aline. Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2007, p. 32.