

The Importance of Maintaining a Child's First Language.

EAL students learn English more effectively when they have developed proficiency in their first language.

How does the child's first language help with the learning of a second language?

If children are proficient in their first language they already “know” about language. They can then apply this knowledge to a different set of circumstances. If a child is literate in their first language they know how language works. First language proficiency provides an excellent foundation for learning a second language. If a child is proficient in their first language their cognitive ability has developed enough to support them in their second language. For example, they already know about guessing the meaning of a word from the context, they know how to predict meaning from a text, they know about text structure, they know about the purposes of different types of text and perhaps most importantly they feel confident as a reader and writer. The concept of literacy is already well developed so learning a second language is a much easier process. Children who are successful second language learners are usually very proficient in their first language. It is less usual for children to be successful second language learners when they have little knowledge and ability in their first language.

How can EAL students develop and maintain their first language?

For some students developing and maintaining their first language is easy because they have regular lessons in this language. However this does not apply to all students but there is still much that can be done to maintain the first language. Parents should make sure that there are good books to read – including fiction, reference books and textbooks in the first language. Children should be encouraged to write letters to grandparents and other family in their home country in their first language. Some of the summer holiday could be devoted to first language learning. The child's first language should be promoted and valued within the family.

Your child's first language is part of their personal, social and cultural identity. A child who is bilingual or multilingual has a solid grounding both educationally and culturally. Maintaining first language is a vital factor in the educational development of your child.

**Terri Hirst
Head of EAL**