

HANDBOOK-INC

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Inclusive Multiliteracy Development in Early Childhood Education and Care



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A 3-year Erasmus+ KA2 Cooperation Partnerships
in School Education project 2023-2026

Read with MEE
early multilingual literacy



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early multilingual literacy



rectoraat
Meertaligheid
en Geletterdheid



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Introduction

Research shows that children who speak multiple languages, particularly those who have recently moved from one country to another, often find it harder to develop strong reading and writing abilities.

It can be hard to access research findings or practical information on the most effective ways to encourage and conduct read-aloud activities with and around children who speak multiple languages. This handbook is written for adults who work with young children (ages 2–6) who speak multiple languages, including early years and preschool teachers and staff. It is also written for parents and caregivers of young children. It presents key research findings in plain language, shares new ideas from the research, and suggests actions to take in Early Childhood Care and classrooms and in the home.



Starting well with reading and writing when a child is young is considered a strong indicator of their future success in school. Reading aloud is a powerful way of supporting the future development of literacy in young children.

THE HANDBOOK DEALS WITH THREE MAIN TOPICS:



Along the way, we explain important research findings, share practical steps that you can apply right away, and point you to where you can find out more information.

At the end of the handbook, there is a checklist to help you determine the quality of books for young children, plus activity ideas for reading books with multilingual children.



Key Terms Explained

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS IN THIS HANDBOOK
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	This term refers to preschool, Montessori, crèche and kindergarten settings.
Children/Pupils	We focus on children aged approximately 2 to 6 years.
Teachers/ECEC Professionals	We use this term to describe the staff who work in early childhood education and care settings.
Multilingual	This term describes children and adults who can communicate in more than one language in their daily life.
Home Language	This is the language that children grow up speaking, used by their parents or caregivers. We separate this from the school language in this Handbook for clarity, even though they may be the same for some children.
Regional or Minority Language	This term is used to refer to a language traditionally used in a certain region and/or by a minority group over a long period within a certain country.
Migrants and Migrant Languages	The term migrant is used here to describe children or adults with a migration background. In other words, we are describing adults who did not grow up in the country where they currently live, and their children. The term migrant languages is used to describe the mother tongues of adults, with a migrant background, and their children.
Literacy	We use the term literacy to describe the ability to read and write. This includes technical skills like reading words, but also early activities like drawing and doodling, and the way children generally interact with any written text.

Multilingualism in Early Learning

In this handbook, we explain how children who speak multiple languages learn to use them. We look at how to recognize and actively use these multiple languages in early learning settings. We'll also talk about the important link between the child's home life and the school or care environment.

We define “multilingualism” as being able to use more than one language to communicate effectively in daily life.

It's about **using** languages, not just **knowing** them. A child doesn't need to be perfectly fluent to use a language; the ability to communicate is what counts.

Moving Beyond Negative Ideas

Too often, people view the school performance of children who speak multiple languages through a negative lens. They see the child's multilingual background as a barrier to learning the language used at school.

When children who speak a different language at home get lower test scores than children who speak only one language, people often blame the home environment. They might point to factors like how many books the family has or how well their parents speak the language used at school. This negative view – sometimes called a “deficit perspective”- puts the problem on multilingual families themselves. It reinforces harmful stereotypes, for example, implying that some multilingual families have “less culture” or fewer resources like books or museum visits). These stereotypes can then cause teachers to have lower expectations for multilingual children and to interact with them differently.

The Benefits of Multilingualism

Research has shown that this negative perspective on multilingualism is wrong. In fact, being able to speak multiple languages is beneficial. It helps children become more aware of how language works (metalinguistic awareness) and improves their thinking and problem-solving skills (cognitive functioning).

“According to a key idea described by Professor James Cummins as “common underlying proficiency”, the knowledge and skills a child gains in one language can actually help form the foundation for learning and developing another language.”



How Children Learn Language

Language development in children, including those who speak multiple languages, happens in four main stages. While every child progresses at their own speed, these stages give us a clear structure for understanding how they learn. It's crucial to remember that the child's environment - including the involvement of parents and teachers - plays a very important role.

The Four Stages of Language Development:



Stage 01

This stage begins before birth!

You probably know that a foetus can hear voices from their mother's womb, but did you know that they can also recognize different sounds? Researchers have found that babies who hear more languages while in the womb can actually recognize them after they are born. In the first few months after birth, babies start to imitate sounds, which is known as babbling.

Towards the end of their first year, toddlers start saying their first words.

A child learning multiple languages will often mix words from those different languages during this time. Their pronunciation might not be perfect because they are still practising how to use their mouth and tongue muscles. After single words, they begin forming short sentences, which gradually become more complex.

Stage 02

Stage 03

In this stage, children become much better at telling the difference between various words and sentences.

They start using language correctly for communication, expressing what they think and feel by giving feedback, asking questions, and sharing information. They also begin to learn basic grammar, which means they start using plural words, adding endings to words, and changing verb forms.

In the final stage, children's vocabulary grows very quickly.

They show a strong understanding of sentence structure, can make connections between ideas, and are able to tell a complete story. They also begin to show the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, showing empathy.

Stage 04



Different Ways Children Become Multilingual

Children can become multilingual in two main ways, depending on when they start learning each language:



LEARNING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE AT THE SAME TIME

Some children are exposed to and grow up with multiple languages at the same time, right from birth.

- They go through the language development stages for each language at the same time.
- Their separate language systems develop side-by-side but are always linked by a deeper system of knowledge - like concepts and images - that isn't tied to any single language.
- These children are often good at following the rules of each language correctly and know instinctively which language to use with which person from a young age.



LEARNING ONE LANGUAGE AFTER ANOTHER ONE

Other children learn their first language from birth, and go through all of its development stages before starting to learn a second language.

- Their first language system is already mostly formed, so they approach the second language through the lens of the first one.
- It is vital that they keep developing the first language well, because it has a major impact on how successfully they learn the second one.
- Because of this established foundation, the second language often develops differently than the first, sometimes skipping some of the earliest developmental periods.

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Factors That Influence Language Learning

Several things can affect how well and how quickly a multilingual child develops their languages:

How different the languages are

The greater the differences between the languages (linguistic distance), the more challenging it might be.

Attitudes

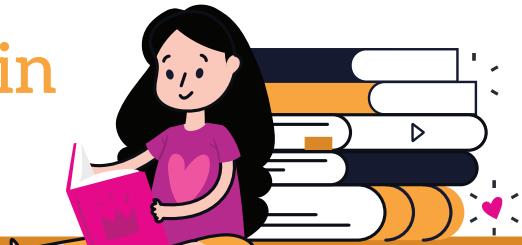
How people feel about the child's languages, and where those languages fall in the "language hierarchy" (whether one language is valued more than another), greatly influences the child.

Socio-economic Background

Things like a family's income and access to resources matter. Children from lower-income backgrounds often face more difficulties getting access educational resources or receiving support in the home, which can negatively affect their school performance. Conversely, children from higher-income backgrounds often benefit from more advantages like learning materials, extra activities, and greater parental participation in their education.

While many of these factors - like a family's background - are fixed and can't be changed by teachers or professionals, there are still many important aspects that adults in early learning settings can influence, and we will describe those below.

Using Multiple Languages in Early Learning Settings



Even though teachers increasingly understand that a child's home language is a valuable resource for learning and a part of their identity, many report that they don't feel prepared to handle the language diversity they see in the classroom. Recognising all the languages that young children bring to the classroom has several major benefits.

- It supports a multilingual child's language skills, awareness of language, and self-esteem.
- It creates a welcoming environment that encourages an open and curious attitude about different languages among children.

From the research: A practice called Translanguaging

When bringing multiple languages into early learning, it's important to know that activities that strictly separate languages - by time, subject, or teacher - often don't match the flexible ways multilingual children naturally use their language skills.

Translanguaging is a term used by some researchers to describe the spontaneous, flexible language habits of multilingual speakers. In early childhood, many multilingual children naturally translanguage as they communicate. Young children who know more than one language naturally mix their languages when they talk, and they may also use body language, gestures, and other ways of showing what they mean.

The term 'translanguaging' comes from a Welsh word, *trawsieithu*. Welsh educator Cen Williams coined the term. It originally referred to an educational strategy in Wales that involved switching between the majority language (English) for information, and the minority language (Welsh) for active use, supporting the revitalization of Welsh.

When ECEC teachers use translanguaging, they do so to improve communication and support children's learning, literacy, participation, and well-being. They also use it to value children's language skills and identities. To achieve

this, they use strategies such as translating, switching to the child's home language, repeating a child's words in two languages, helping children translate for each other, and using different kinds of multimodal resources. These practices create more teacher-child interaction, and teachers also learn from pupils' other languages, which helps build positive relationships. Encouraging children to take part in classroom talk increases their engagement, which supports the development of early literacy skills.

Did You Know?

Making Connections Between Languages

Do you know that you learn better by making connections between languages, rather than keeping languages separate? The work of researchers in the Basque Country, Professor Jasone Cenoz and Professor Durk Gorter, shows that using two or more languages in the same classroom is a pedagogical strategy that promotes deeper understanding of all the different languages in a child's repertoire.

Seeing languages as something to be isolated and kept apart doesn't reflect the reality of how languages are really used as a resource by young multilinguals.

The DREAM (Donostia Research Group on Education and Multilingualism) research group at the University of the Basque Country is a world leader in exploring how children and young people learn multiple languages simultaneously. Their research covers many aspects of multilingual education, including language competence, curriculum, and teaching practices. One important focus is pedagogical translanguaging, a teaching approach that challenges the traditional "one language only" rule in the classroom. Instead, teachers design activities that encourage students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire, leveraging their native or stronger languages to support the learning of new ones. In pedagogical translanguaging, educators intentionally bridge the different languages in the classroom and in pupils' repertoires to support and improve results.



Different learning opportunities

Unfortunately, monolingual and multilingual children do not always get the same learning opportunities in ECEC settings, because adults may interact with them in different ways – usually quite unconsciously. For example, research shows that kindergartens focused on teaching Dutch as a second language tend to be more teacher-centred with less interaction between pupils, compared to mainstream kindergartens, where lots of interaction between children was the norm. In some Dutch kindergartens, newly arrived migrant children spend about one third of their time without interacting with any peers, unlike in mainstream settings.

Differences in teacher-child interaction are also visible in the kind of support children receive. Teachers often simplify questions for multilingual children by limiting the possible answers, while they give monolingual children more hints so that they can work out the answer themselves.

Multilingual pupils often participate less actively in both small- and large-group activities. This may reflect a greater gap between their background knowledge and that of their monolingual peers, but also the way that teachers and caregivers interact with them.

Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna has conducted extensive research on naónraí (Irish-medium preschools). Based on her investigations of young children in early years settings, she advises:

- using rich, meaningful interactions, such as repeated storytelling
- using play and everyday routines, like the 'Lunch Ritual', to provide children with rich input.

Used together, these activities help children to participate more fully in a second language environment.

Her research shows that by focusing on the kind of incidental language learning that happens in the 'gaps' (like putting on coats) along with intentional learning - scaffolded, inclusive activities - adults can support young children to develop stronger language skills.



The importance of allowing children to talk

Research from Dutch kindergarten classrooms shows that even within a single classroom, teachers offer different pupils different opportunities deeper, extended talk. Elaborative or exploratory talk gives children more chances to participate actively, which supports both engagement and learning. Looking specifically at reading aloud, when teachers give elaborative responses to children's interactions during storytime, children are able to explain ideas, make connections, and think aloud. They become more active participants in the classroom and speculate about things beyond what is happening directly in the book. On the other hand, evaluative talk, where teachers assess or judge a child's comment or answer (e.g. "Yes, that's right", "Good job", "No, that's not it") tends to shut down the conversation, prevents the child from explaining or thinking further, and limits opportunities for deeper language use.



Main Goal	Elaborative Talk	Evaluative Talk
Teacher Talk	Help children think more deeply about the story and talk more. Curious, encouraging, inviting children to share ideas. "Why do you think that happened?" "What do you think will happen next?" "How do you feel about that?" "Tell me more?"	Check if a child's answer is right or wrong. Short comments, confirming, or correcting. "Yes, that's right." "No, not quite." "Good job."
Children's Talk	With longer answers—explaining, guessing, imagining, connecting the story to the external world and to their own lives.	
Nature of the interaction	A back-and-forth conversation where ideas get bigger and clearer.	
How It Helps	Builds vocabulary, imagination, story understanding, and confidence in talking.	Helps them check facts but doesn't grow their thinking.
Example	The book shows a rabbit: "Why do you think the rabbit is lost? What in the picture tells you that?"	What animal is this? "Yes, it's a rabbit."

Relationships with parents/caregivers and ECEC staff

Children who experience cultural continuity (similarities in language, culture, and perspectives between their home and school) often do better than children who experience contradictions or big differences (cultural discontinuity). When the home and school share a linguistic or cultural background, it improves communication and mutual understanding between parents and staff. Even when there's no shared language, staff can make an effort to embrace multilingualism and communicate with parents who speak a minority language, for example using simple daily greetings. Practices like this help to foster cultural continuity and benefit children.

Strong working partnerships between parents and early learning staff are vital for a child's development and well-being.

Asking parents and children for information about their home routines or for words and phrases in their home language shows an open attitude toward the child's culture. This not only reassures children and shows them their languages are valued, but it also supports their learning by building on their existing "funds of knowledge."

Funds of Knowledge refers to the diverse knowledge, skills, and experiences that a family accumulates through their culture and history. Teachers who see the "whole child" and recognize their different roles and activities outside of school can better facilitate learning. This approach allows teachers to understand the cultural and historical foundations of a child's home life, leading to new and creative teaching strategies. It's fundamentally about creating partnerships for teaching that respect the student's background and intelligence.

When teachers use a "funds of identity" approach - asking children about parts of their identity, perhaps through sharing pictures or making identity-related objects - students become more engaged and show better learning attitudes. This approach also improves their collaboration skills with peers.



“Third Spaces” for multilingual children

Educators can encourage the creation of a “third space” in the classroom, where languages aren’t seen as distinct entities, but as a flexible and creative way of communicating by multilingual speakers. This can create a safe space for multilingual children where their own ways of using language are normal.

A flexible use of all languages can help bridge the gap between home and school by drawing on all of the language and cultural knowledge held by children.

When this acceptance is a standard classroom practice, children are able to use their full range of language skills when talking about personal items like pictures or drawings. To create this kind of safe language space, staff should consider the experiences of all children, not just those who speak the majority language, allowing every student to use their knowledge and communication practices for learning.

Building a Strong Partnership with Parents

Parents should be actively involved when implementing multilingual practices. This can be done by organizing meetings to share information about multilingualism, taking part in classroom storytelling activities, or simply asking parents for translations when needed.

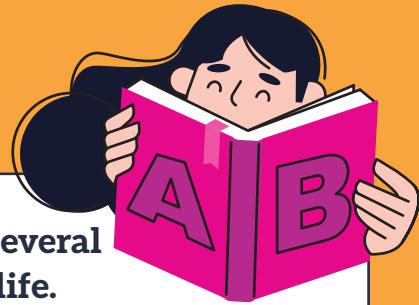
A two-way relationship is essential: staff shouldn’t only act as experts, but should also learn from parents, recognizing them as experts on their own child. This educational partnership benefits children’s learning and participation in school, and it can help reduce inequalities.

These partnerships involve power dynamics: staff have authority in the classroom, but parents hold more influence outside of it. In fact, research shows that the involvement of parents at home is a significant factor in a child’s success at school. Trust is also crucial, as parents are entrusting their children to the professionals. For a relationship to thrive, both parents and staff must be aware of these power dynamics and their mutual expectations regarding their roles.

A study in Belgium found that multilingual parents who spoke a minority language generally had high trust and communication with early learning staff. But the study also showed that ECEC staff rarely used languages other than the majority language and didn’t usually ask parents for words in their home language.

When school staff are not open to a parent’s culture and language, it can be damaging in various ways. A welcoming and open attitude toward different languages and cultures is beneficial not only for children’s well-being and learning but also for building strong ties with parents.

Key Ideas



Multilingualism means more than just knowing several languages; it's about actively using them in daily life.

The practice of using all of a child's available languages flexibly is a powerful teaching tool.

It helps staff improve communication, enrich learning, and genuinely recognize children's full range of language skills and identities. Integrating multilingualism involves recognizing the value of all languages, using flexible approaches like translanguaging, and creating strong home-school connections.

A child's language learning happens in four distinct phases. Children learning languages simultaneously (from birth) go through these phases for all languages at the same time. Children learning languages sequentially (one after the other) go through them separately. Development is influenced by things like how different the languages are, family background, attitudes, and how people feel about those languages.

Embracing multilingualism is good for every child. It not only supports a child's language skills but also boosts their self-esteem, language awareness, and encourages an open-minded attitude toward language diversity.

Strong partnerships between parents and early learning staff are essential for a child's development and happiness. Having an open and welcoming attitude toward different languages and cultures strengthens relationships with parents and enriches children's learning experiences and reading development. When there is cultural continuity (similarities in language, culture, and background) between the home and school, it helps build mutual understanding and trust.

A "funds of knowledge" approach means valuing the unique knowledge, skills, and experiences a child gains outside of school, which then provides ideas for teaching strategies that build on the child's interests.

Practical Ways to Support Multilingual Children

Key Takeaways

Some suggestions for ECEC staff and parents/caregivers to create an inclusive and supportive language environment.

Bring other languages into the learning space. Use songs, rhymes, and stories in languages besides the main school language. This sends a clear message that all languages are valuable for learning.

Teach and communicate throughout the entire day, not just during dedicated language lessons. Use languages during mealtimes, transitions, and free play.

Give children a safe space to use their languages in their own way. Encourage play, art, and drama where children can naturally switch between languages without being stopped or limited to just one.

Use and allow the use of all languages to actively promote their visibility and status in the classroom, even in simple ways

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Did You Know?

Did you know that Basque is the oldest living language in Europe? It does not belong to a language family like the other languages spoken in Europe, and its origins are unknown. It's known as a 'language isolate'. Bilingual speakers of Basque and Spanish therefore speak two very different languages.

Focus on Communication and Conversations

Don't ignore how children already communicate. Pay attention to their gestures, music, and visuals, rather than focusing only on verbal or written school language. Ensure all children can access learning opportunities, regardless of how well they speak the main school language. Let children express themselves using any language, as well as gestures, drawings, and other non-verbal communication.

Engage in "elaborative talk." Ask deep questions that relate the lesson's content to the children's personal experiences and knowledge, and encourage them to interact and discuss ideas with their peers. Use strategies that encourage all children to participate in conversations. This includes asking open-ended questions, providing support, giving lots of examples, and offering helpful feedback. Support multilingual children with specific strategies like translating, switching to their home language, correcting grammar in both languages if it's possible, or creating language buddy partnerships.

Home-School Partnerships

Support continuity and links between home and school. Whenever possible, use children's home languages, ask parents for translations, or invite parents to lead reading activities in the home language. Build a positive relationship with families by adopting an open, positive view of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Ask parents and caregivers about the languages children speak at home. Create a reciprocal relationship by asking parents what activities are most effective for their individual child and adopting those when appropriate. Actively involve parents. Have conversations with them about their child's languages, create a poster or help desk for multilingual families, regularly invite parents to lead bilingual storytelling, and ask parents to help with translations for the staff.

Reading and Writing in Early Learning



This part of our handbook focuses on how young children develop their early reading and writing skills (literacy) in our modern, media-rich world (multiliteracy).

We will also look at how to make book reading - including digital books - interactive and inclusive in ECEC settings.



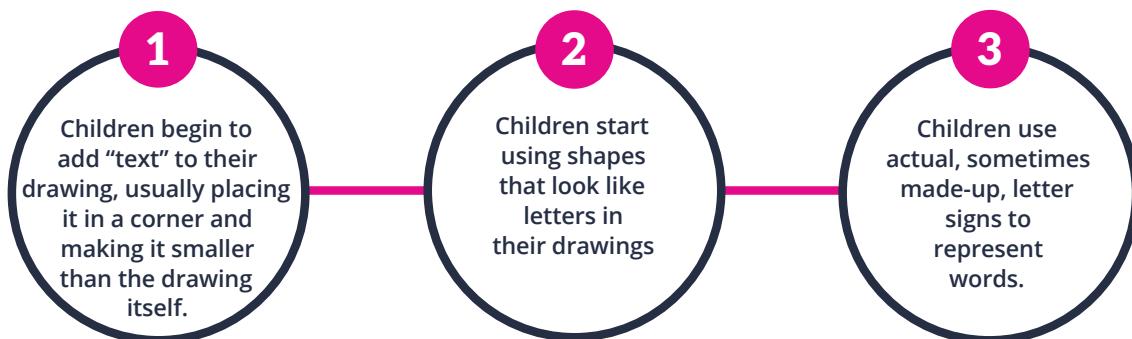
Early Multilingual Literacy

From a social perspective, young children learn to read and write by observing their environment and noticing how adults and older children create and interact with written texts. Social and economic factors also play a role in a child's early literacy development. For example, research shows that teachers sometimes expect less parental involvement in families from lower-income households.

One effective way to support literacy in ECEC classrooms to make all languages visible, through posters, books, stickers, labels and pictures. This ensures that the diverse language landscape is represented, making the environment more welcoming and inclusive for every child and family.

How Literacy Begins

The first signs of a child's journey toward reading and writing are doodling and drawing. Children then gradually learn to assign meaning to these marks in three phases.



Conversations about these doodles, drawings, and early texts are crucial for children to become confident "users" of the reading and writing practices common in their environment.

Multilingual children's path to early literacy is the same as that of children who speak only one language. However, the way written texts are used at home or in the community can differ. This can sometimes lead to a problem: reading and writing in the school language may become associated with "learning," while reading and writing in the home language are not seen in the same way and are given a lower status.

A consequence of this is that multilingual children may experience more difficulty than their peers because they aren't allowed to use all the language resources available to them to understand and complete literacy tasks.

It is therefore important to value non-school texts - like reading community signs, writing grocery lists, or using social media - that might be different from those used at school, so all children can demonstrate their full abilities.

Researchers suggest that reading and writing practices shouldn't be seen as separate categories, but as overlapping and interconnected skills. This helps to understand multilingual language use better than using simple opposing concepts (such as reading versus writing).

Digital Tools for Early Literacy Development



Did you know that reading activities can include not just reading aloud, but also many other different ways of communicating, like pointing, using different voices, facial expressions, and acting things out?

This is why digital tools like audiobooks and apps can be great ways to support reading development. Digital tools can even take on some of the adult's role in shared reading. For instance, a voiceover might ask questions during the story or provide feedback on multiple-choice questions. Although apps and digital tools cannot fully replace an adult's role in reading to children, using technology in education can be a very effective way to boost children's early reading and writing skills. Since young children naturally use many different ways to communicate and understand things, digital tools can be a stimulating way of supporting language learning in early childhood settings.

Computer and mobile apps are part of everyday life for young children, and, used in the right way, they can be a great and fun way for children to learn. Digital apps include interactive elements, sounds, graphics, and animations. Apps that encourage creativity and collaboration can support children to quickly increase their vocabulary and interact.



Did You Know?

A multilingual view of Irish

- The Irish language, called *Gaeilge* in Irish, is a Celtic language spoken across Ireland. It is related to Scottish Gaelic and to Manx (spoken on the Isle of Man).
- Irish is Ireland's first official language, with English the second official language. Irish is also an official working language of the European Union. However, despite its official status, Irish is an endangered minority language with declining numbers of speakers outside of education.
- Irish is compulsory in schools in Ireland from ages 6-16. About 40% of the population can speak some Irish. Only one in ten people who can speak Irish describe themselves as being able to speak it very well.
- The most recent census of Ireland in 2022 showed that just over 70,000 people speak the Irish language daily outside of school. That's about 1.4% of the total population.
- The number of Irish-medium schools and pre-schools is increasing, and there is strong interest in learning Irish online and in community settings. The government is committed to making Irish language a living language rather than just a school language.
- *Naíonraí* are Irish-medium pre-schools for under 6s. They focus on the child's holistic development through play. Stiúrthóirí (practitioners) speak only Irish to build language skills for both native and non-native speaking children. A total immersion model is used to create a living language environment. Since the first *Naíonra* was established in 1968, some 325 Irish-medium pre-schools have opened their doors, and numbers continue to grow.



Digital storybooks present information in several ways at once - through text, audio, pictures, and animation - and can boost a child's language understanding.

What makes a good digital story book?

- Interactive features, like animations you activate by touch, or short games, can help comprehension if they don't distract the child from the story. If a child has too many options - like flipping pages, activating animations, and playing games - they're likely to get distracted.
- It's important that all parts of a digital book contribute directly to the story. Books with supportive, integrated visuals and sounds (rather than random ones) help children process information without getting overwhelmed. This improves children's vocabulary learning, as well as their understanding and memory of the story.
- Even digital storybooks with minimal extra features lead to similar comprehension and memory results as reading physical books.
- Researchers have found that the interactive elements of digital storybooks increase engagement by giving children more control, encouraging them to take a more active role in shared reading.

Audiobooks are another digital tool that can support early literacy.

- Audiobooks provide a convenient and accessible platform, especially for younger children, combining listening with other activities like physical responses to the story (jumping, waving, dancing).
- Research shows that children understand stories similarly whether they hear them or read them. When a story is both read and heard at the same time, it can boost understanding.
- Other benefits of audiobooks include modelling pronunciation of words for children, and allowing them to focus on the story without being held back by their word-reading skills. While some view audiobooks as "cheating" because the narrator does the reading for the learner, they are in fact a valuable addition to any reading programme, home or classroom.

TOP TIP!

Try combining the audio book with a paper copy of the book in the classroom. This Dutch website prentenboekeninalletalen.nl provides free audiobooks in different languages.

Emerging Technologies

- Augmented Reality (AR) is an interactive experience, mediated by a computer or device, that enhances the physical world through the computer-generated images. Storybooks which feature AR encourage children's autonomy by giving them some control over the reading experience and stimulates their engagement and learning outcomes through interactive reading
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of the latest digital tools that can support early literacy. However, research in this area is still limited and mostly focuses on "AI literacy" (understanding and interacting with AI) rather than on how AI can develop literacy. AI tools often lack the safety features required for young children. However, it is likely that new age-appropriate AI tools will be developed to support literacy in young children.

Dialogic Book Reading in Early Learning

Reading storybooks is a vital activity for a child's early reading and writing development at home and at school. It helps children learn new words, improve their understanding of stories (comprehension), and become more interested in reading (engagement).

Studies show that interaction between an adult (teacher, parent or caregiver) and a child while reading a book significantly boosts the child's language development by increasing their vocabulary and knowledge of printed words.

Dialogic reading creates a unique environment for children to engage with a book. Children are asked to connect the story to their own life, predict what might happen next, or draw conclusions about the plot.

Asking questions and engaging the child in a discussion are more effective for language learning than simply pointing out specific words. Other great strategies, focussing on interaction and dialogue, include:

- Asking open-ended questions
- Sharing comments that encourage the child to respond
- Giving positive feedback
- Linking the story to the child's real life

The Benefits of Digital Books



Digital books can be useful for children who are still learning the language of the classroom. Multimedia features - especially those connecting words to images - support children in creating a mental picture of the story, making it easier to understand.

Did You Know?

Did you know that 84 regional minority languages, spoken by 209 communities, are recognised in Europe?

These languages are recognised by countries via the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Dr Myrte Gosen's work focuses on how young children learn and understand language during shared reading. She shows that it's not just reading the words on the page that matters, but how teachers and children interact, talk about the story, and participate together.

These interactions help children build understanding, develop concepts, and become more confident with language. A key finding from her research is that children learn more when they actively participate in discussions about the story, rather than just listening passively. For example, when teachers ask open-ended questions about the pictures, story events, or characters' feelings, children are more likely to connect ideas, use new words, and develop a deeper understanding of the story. This shows that interactive reading strategies can be applied in classrooms or at home to support early language and literacy development.

Dr Gosen's research shows that the magic of a book happens in the 'talk' around it. It's not just about the words on the page, but how adults and children participate together.

A powerful way to do this is to pause and wonder - by pausing to wonder out loud about a character's feelings or a strange picture, we create space for the child to speak. This moves them from being a passive listener to an active storyteller. When children actively join the conversation, they don't just learn new words – they build the confidence to understand and connect with the world around them.

Why Dialogic Reading Works

Asking open questions, following the child's interests, and repeating and expanding on what the child says have really positive effects on their language, literacy, and thinking skills.

When reading to a group with different languages, it's important to remember that not all children have the same experiences or opportunities when it comes to learning to read.

Dialogic reading also helps children's social-emotional skills, such as their ability to understand different points of view and grasp other people's feelings.

Teachers can encourage interactive reading by bringing in children's home languages. For instance, staff can ask parents to come to class and read aloud together, with each adult reading the same part of the story in a different language.

Using audiobooks or digital storybooks in other languages can also help multilingual children better understand the main story.

Another valuable practice is buddy reading, where older and younger children read and discuss books together. This boosts literacy and vocabulary through social interaction and play, while also increasing motivation. If the buddies share the same home language, they can help each other connect that language to the school language.

When teachers read in this interactive way, children are encouraged to actively participate, leading to meaningful and detailed conversations. Taking part in these conversations is good for children's language learning, knowledge, and reasoning skills.

For example, when children explain why something happened in the story or suggest solutions to a problem, they are showing both their reasoning and their learning.

Reading as if in conversation like this works well because the adult and child are positioned as equals in the interaction – the book is the source that determines the final explanation, so children's ideas are discussed as possibilities rather than evaluated as right or wrong. Keep in mind that children's participation isn't only verbal. Listening, observing, and non-verbal actions that are part of the conversation still mean they are actively engaged.

TOP TIP!

Create Story Bags

Fill a bag with one or more picture book along with some small toys or items related to the book's theme. Children can use these objects to make their own stories during play and better understand the stories' contents by relating it to their own experiences. Include a note for parents/caregivers. Children can swap the bags when they have finished with the book.

In The Storytime Project, a five-week family literacy programme run through local libraries in partnership with Marino Institute of Education and the Northside Partnership in Dublin, parents learn dialogic reading strategies to use at home.

Families take home books and receive weekly support, helping children develop oral language and vocabulary skills, boosting parents' confidence in reading with their children, and strengthening connections between families and their local library. The project encourages parents to continue reading together beyond the programme, with progress celebrated at the end through a graduation event.

Dr Joan Kiely's work highlights the power of dialogic reading, where adults and children read together interactively, talk about the story, and ask questions rather than just reading aloud. Her research on The Storytime Project, run through local libraries, she shows how this child-centered approach helps children develop language skills.

Kiely advocates using the PEER sequence:

- Prompt the child to say something about the book.
- Evaluate their response.
- Expand on what they said.
- Repeat the prompt to see what they've learned.



Did You Know?

Did you know that there are six languages in the Celtic language family?

These are Welsh, Irish, Gaelic, Breton, Cornish, and Manx.

Did You Know?

A multilingual view of Basque

- Basque, called *Euskara* in Basque, is a fascinating language. It is Europe's oldest language.
- Linguistically, it is unlike all the other languages of Europe. Linguists still do not know much about its ancestry!
- Basque is spoken in the Basque Country, a region in northern Spain and southwestern France.
- The Basque autonomous community in northern Spain, just over 800,000 people speak Basque fluently. There are just over 430,000 passive speakers of Basque in the region. These are people who understand the language but who have difficulty speaking it.
- ECEC plays a key role in the revitalization and transmission of the Basque language, with Basque immersion early education increasingly popular
- In the city of Donostia/San Sebastian, a Central Children's Library supports childhood literacy in lots of different ways – promoting children's literature in Basque, Spanish and many other languages, preserving and promoting Basque storytelling, and providing access to a wealth of resources to parents.



Representation Matters

Multilingual children are not always shown in the books they read. Ideally, all children should be able to see themselves and explore the world in the literature available to them. For example, when children of colour can't identify with characters, it can have an negative impact on their self-esteem and reduce their enjoyment of reading. Studies have found that multilingual children sometimes get more non-verbal support from staff, while monolingual children get more verbal support. It can be quite common for staff to discourage children from using languages other than the main language used in the school, rather than encouraging all language use in the classroom.

Ensuring Equal Participation

- Using flexible language activities (like talking about the story in one language then reading it or playing the audio book version in another language) before, during, and after the main reading activity, can help multilingual children understand the text better.
- Adults in the classroom can help to ensure that all languages are valued equally when doing these kinds of activities, to avoid uneven levels of participation.
- It can be helpful to include physical objects (like balls, beanbags, paper hats etc) that represent key parts of the story, and to act out parts of the story, as well as reading the story aloud.

According to research by Professor Roel van Steensel, parents play a very important role in creating a stimulating reading environment and supporting a child's motivation to read.

Simply having books in the house isn't enough. The quality of the interaction is what matters! His research reminds us of the importance of the home literacy environment, and encourages educators and parents to work in tandem.

TOP TIP!

The Global Storybooks website contains free illustrated stories in dozens of different languages from all around the world: globalstorybooks.net/ The stories can be read, played aloud, and downloaded.





Read with MEE
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Key Ideas: Reading and Writing in Early Learning



Early Literacy Foundations

A young child's literacy journey starts by simply watching and interacting with written words in their daily environment.

- A family's income bracket can influence a teacher's expectations for parental involvement.
- Early literacy development progresses from simple doodling to using symbols that look like letters. Conversations about these early writing activities support their development.
- While children who speak one language and those who speak multiple languages learn to read and write in similar ways, the status of their home language compared to the school language can affect their learning experience.
- It's important to recognize and use all the ways children interact with written words outside of school, not just formal school-based tasks, to support every child.

Digital tools are helpful in boosting early literacy.

- Digital storybooks and apps - with their interactive and visual features - can successfully engage children's attention, help them learn new words, and improve their story comprehension.
- While digital books and audiobooks are helpful for things like modelling correct pronunciation, they are not a replacement for the interactive experience of reading with an adult.
- Interactive book reading where adults actively engage children through questions and discussion, is extremely beneficial for developing language and comprehension.
- Use strategies like asking open-ended questions, following the child's interests, and encouraging them to connect the story to their own life. These all boost the child's active participation in the reading activity.

Inclusive Practices



In multilingual classrooms, inclusive practices ensure that all children feel represented and have a fair chance to participate.

- A range of flexible language activities can help close the gaps between a child's home language and the school language. This can support their overall literacy.
- These activities could include digital tools or audio books, bilingual readers, picture books that can be acted out, and the use of props when reading aloud.
- Involving parents in reading in the home language or using buddy reading (pairing children up to read together) are great ways to include a child's home languages in reading practices.



Did You Know?

A multilingual view of Frysk

- *Fryslân*, a province in the north of the Netherlands, is a living example of a multilingual region. With a total of about 660,000 inhabitants, over half (61%) of the inhabitants of *Fryslân* have Frisian their first language or shared first language. Frisian (in Frisian: *Frysk*) is a minority language that is recognised as one of the province's two official languages besides Dutch, the country's majority language.
- Interestingly, Frisian is mostly a spoken language. While 90% of the inhabitants of *Fryslân* can easily understand the language and 64% can speak it, only 19% can read it well.
- Besides Frisian, other language varieties are also present in the region, including regional variants of Frisian spoken in the larger cities, as well as Bildts and Stellingwarfs, which are both spoken in specific areas of the province. Combined with the many different home languages spoken by children in *Fryslân*, superdiversity is an established fact in the province's classrooms.
- While many people are unaware of this, Frisian is also part of a language family and has two close relatives! As such, *Frysk* is also called West Frisian to contrast with the two languages spoken in Germany. North Frisian is spoken close to the border with Denmark by about 10,000 speakers, and Saterfrisian is the only variety of East Frisian that is used today and is spoken by about 2,200 people.



Practical Ways to Support Literacy and Reading

Some steps to support children's reading and writing, especially multilingual children

1. Acknowledging and welcoming all languages

- Be positive about all languages represented in the classroom, show an appreciation of and celebrate how each child is unique in terms of their language identity.
- When checking a child's early reading and writing skills, try to look at their abilities in all of their languages, not just the main language of schooling. You can ask their parents/guardians:
 - which languages the child uses at home
 - what kinds of books, songs, or stories the child engages with in each language
 - whether the child shows interest in letters, sounds, or writing in any of their languages, and their preferences when it comes to language activities.
- Choose inclusive books that feature characters who look like the children in your class. This helps avoid negative effects on their reading motivation and self-esteem
- When choosing books, look for bilingual texts, use translations, or translate the story together with the children
- Choose books which celebrate children's interests, friends, home languages and unique identities. Choose books which make them feel special!

2. Make Reading Interactive and Inclusive

- Stimulate deep conversations around books by asking open-ended questions, repeating what children say, and expanding on their answers
- Encourage children to use all their communicative resources, including gestures, actions, drawings, and their home language
- Accept contributions as possibilities rather than judging them as right or wrong. For example, use the book to provide the final answer instead of just closing off the child's ideas
- Acknowledge and confirm all engagement, whether verbal or non-verbal, and follow the child's interest to guide the discussion
- Support understanding by using physical objects, signs, and pictures to illustrate the story. Repeat the story multiple times or provide support/tell the story in the home language

- Give visual (non-verbal) information at the same time as verbal information, rather than after, to help children process
- Pair children up (buddy reading) to read texts together. This allows them to help each other understand what they are reading

3. Support Language Development

- Focus on clear language modelling: Use clear pronunciation, repeat, rephrase, and expand on what children say
- Provide corrective feedback gently: Use techniques like rephrasing correctly in response or simply translating a phrase into another language if you can

4. Using Digital Tools

- Keep groups small (two or three children) when using apps so everyone can see the screen and participate actively
- If possible, group children who share a language so they can help each other understand the text
- Discuss digital texts before, during, and after reading, just as you would with a paper book
- If using digital storybooks, ensure multimedia features do not distract from the story. Give children the option to turn off or change the volume of sound effects if needed
- Limit definitions for hard words to just a few times per book, and have them appear automatically during the story

5. Involve Parents and Caregivers

- Invite parents and caregivers to read and talk about stories in different languages with the class.
- Treat parents as full partners by trusting them to share their own effective practices for their child
- Bring the home into the classroom, by asking parents and family members for suggestions of books to read aloud.

Professional Development for Early Learning Staff



Professional training and development can significantly improve the quality of early childhood education.

This part of the handbook discusses key research findings relevant to ECEC teachers.

It focuses on multilingualism and literacy in early learning settings.

Multilingualism

Professional development focused on multilingualism can provide staff with new knowledge about topics like how children with more than one language learn and use those languages, how to use languages supportively and flexibly in the classroom, and how the bilingual/multilingual brain works. Staff can then design and implement new multilingual practices in their classrooms. They can discuss and evaluate these new practices with their colleagues or the organizers during group or individual meetings.

Research suggests that teachers who participate in such programmes:

- Use more multilingual practices in the classroom.
- Develop more positive attitudes toward multilingualism, which, in turn, influences the attitudes of parents and children
- Children in their classrooms show improved awareness of how language works.

Professional development can also happen at the whole-school level. For example, schools can join the Language Friendly School network, and a language plan tailored to their specific needs.

More information is available at <https://languagefriendlyschool.org>

The Challenge of Changing Habits

It can be difficult to fully adopt new methods, even after training. All ECEC staff need time, support and collaboration to learn new ways of working and to make these new practices their own.



Training in Literacy

The structure of professional development programmes focusing on literacy is often similar to training in multilingualism, but the focus is on supporting young children's reading and writing development.

Key topics to develop knowledge of early literacy include:

- How children develop and build their vocabulary
- The sounds of language
- Knowledge of letters and printed words, how sentences are built
- How to maintain children's interest, engagement, and enjoyment of reading and writing activities

Training positively influences teachers' classroom behaviour during literacy activities, such as how teachers can model language, give high-quality feedback, and create opportunities for children to contribute to discussions on their own. Some successful programmes specifically include collaboration with parents. This encourages the use of materials to support literacy both at school and at home, and can also improve how parents communicate with their child and the school

“When planning any staff development, it's essential to remember that it takes time for professionals to fully absorb new knowledge and adapt their day-to-day practices. Training must allow enough time for changes to happen.



How to make changes that last

Top tips to for effective training programmes for ECEC professionals:

- Offer long-term support. Training shouldn't be a one-time event. Provide professional development over an extended period so teachers have enough time to absorb new knowledge and confidently put new approaches in place.
- Make training collaborative and hands-on. Encourage teachers to work together, focus on practical actions, and explore questions or problems they encounter.
- Consider using videos for reflection. Recording activities for reflection afterwards is a powerful tool. Discussing these recordings helps teachers see how others work, identify what strategies are effective, and adapt those ideas for their own classroom.
- Practise giving and receiving feedback. To help develop new approaches to teaching methods, work on trying out activities directly during training. Include coaching, and modelling reciprocal feedback.
- Include families and the community. Depending on what the school and staff need, invite children's families and community members into the process. This allows teachers to directly interact with parents and caregivers, and gain a better understanding of their values, beliefs, and attitudes toward home languages, learning, and literacy development.

Learn from others

One of the best ways to develop new practices is to learn from others. Some of the examples below may be helpful to explore and adapt for your own context.

Lêš-mar-foar-wiken - Just Read Aloud weeks

This is a yearly campaign promoting reading aloud to pre-school children in Fryslân. Every year, a new book about the character Tomke, with stories, songs, and poems, is written in Frisian alongside translations into other regional varieties. The book is sent to all preschools in Fryslân and special attention is paid to reading together.

The Fryske Berneboeke-ambassadeur - Frisian children's book ambassador

ambassador promotes children's books and reading at schools, libraries, and events throughout Fryslân. They work alongside the Dutch children's book ambassador, but pay special attention to the multilingual situation in Fryslân. Several other countries in Europe also have their own book ambassador.

Tools and Activities



Choosing the Right Books to Support Multiliteracy in Young Children

Selecting the right books for young children can feel overwhelming, especially with so many beautiful titles on the shelf. This checklist is designed to help early years educators, parents, and carers make confident, informed choices that support early literacy development.

Whether you're picking a story for group time or choosing a bedtime favourite, these suggestions will guide you toward books that spark curiosity, strengthen language skills, and invite joyful reading experiences. Use the checklist as a quick reference whenever you're faced with a decision—so every book you share helps lay the foundations for a lifelong love of reading.

The Read With MEE team compiled this checklist through consultation with a wide range of ECEC practitioners, researchers, parents and family members from the Basque Country, Ireland, and Fryslân.



1. Language and Literary Features

Language quality

- Books should use correct grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. If a dialect or another variety of language is used, it should be authentic and correct, not just a translation or transliteration.
- Texts that support explicit teaching (phonics, letters/sounds, vocabulary, social concepts).

Literary quality

- Books are not mere texts; they are literature productions. High-quality writing captures children's attention: rhymes and repetition help early readers, while rich ideas and well-crafted stories stimulate imagination.

Translation quality & authenticity (for dual/multilingual books)

- Good translations read naturally, not word-for-word. Ideally, local voices are involved, making the story feel authentic to all cultures represented.
- There is a balance of languages (for dual/multilingual books).
- Both or all languages should have equal weight. If one is minimized, children may feel their language is less valuable.

Language appropriateness

- The language level should match children's age and proficiency: familiar words for beginners, more complex structures as skills grow.
- Accessibility of vocabulary and grammar: Everyday, useful vocabulary keeps children engaged; avoid unusual or rare words that confuse instead of help.
- Text complexity & readability: Developmentally appropriate sentence length, vocabulary load; repetition and predictability build confidence in reading.
- Richness of vocabulary & conceptual depth: Children benefit from encountering new, interesting words and ideas that go beyond casual conversation.
- Genre variety: Exposure to different genres (stories, poems, songs, non-fiction) helps children learn multiple ways of using language.

2. Content

Age-appropriateness

- Content should fit children's maturity and understanding: what is exciting for a 6-year-old may bore or overwhelm a 10-year-old.

Theme/topic relevance

- Topics engaging for children, relevant across cultures, and suitable for dual/multilingual contexts.
- Connection to children's lives: Books that reflect family, friends, or community experiences help children connect reading with real life.
- Cultural relevance & authenticity: Stories should reflect children's cultures in a respectful way, avoiding stereotypes or tokenism.

Identity & representation

- Affirmation of children's identities in a respectful way, avoiding stereotypes or tokenism.
- Books shouldn't only focus on heritage or "exotic" stories. Everyday topics, science, and global citizenship are equally important.

- Stories that support belonging, empathy, friendship, respect, justice.
- Books that highlight multilingualism, inclusion, and co-existence prepare children to live alongside others.
- Stories that are related with surrounding topics or domains (family, pets, friends...)
- Fun and playful stories make children want to read, which are the best motivator for literacy.

3. Design and Accessibility

Illustrations & visual supports:

- Clear, engaging, culturally sensitive illustrations that scaffold comprehension; engaging, not distracting or decorating; onomatopoeia, visual clues, character development through the book's illustrations.

Text readability:

- Limited text per page for better reading. Too much text on a page discourages young readers. Short passages paired with illustrations are easier to process.

Typography & layout (for dual/multilingual books):

- Both languages should be presented equally, with clear fonts and spacing. Visual emphasis (bold, italics, caps) should support meaning, not distract.

Format & durability:

- Age-appropriate formats (board books, picture books); sturdy for young children.

Affordability & availability:

- A great book is only useful if children and teachers can access it — consider looking for locally available, affordable, accessible books in print/digital/audio formats.

Usability across settings:

- Books that can be enjoyed at home, that can be read aloud in class or in small groups, making them versatile teaching tools.

Community fit:

- Consider books and publishers that are aligned with local language practices, policies, and literacy traditions.
- Locally authored or co-produced tend to be more sustainable, contextually appropriate and more affordable; builds capacity for writers/illustrators in minority languages.

Did You Know?

44% of the world's languages are considered endangered.

The majority of these endangered languages are minority, indigenous languages. Languages are considered to be stable when the children in the language community are still acquiring and using the language. If that situation changes, languages typically decline until they are endangered, and then risk becoming extinct.

Supporting young children in reading doesn't just teach letters and words.

It builds curiosity, strengthens brain connections, and boosts language skills that last a lifetime. Early reading experiences also foster empathy, imagination, and confidence.

Children with a strong grasp of their home language typically learn a second language more deeply and quickly than children whose home language is forgotten.

Reading in children's home languages alongside the school language boosts learning, confidence, and identity, helping multilingual children thrive across all languages.

Handbook-INC:

Inclusive Multiliteracy Development in Early Childhood Education and Care

This handbook, developed by the Read With MEE Project, is a practical, research-informed guide designed to support the language and literacy development of young children. Written in **plain, accessible language**, it brings together the latest insights from literacy, linguistic diversity, and multilingualism research, making complex findings easy to understand and apply.

This handbook is perfect for **early childhood educators, parents, caregivers, and anyone interested in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care**. It provides clear guidance on best practices for fostering multiliteracy, helping children unlock **reading as a superpower**—building confidence, curiosity, and the ability to connect with multiple languages and cultures. Grounded in research, it equips readers with tools and strategies that can be used every day, both in classrooms and at home.

About the project and the handbook's authors:

Read with MEE (Read with Multilingual Early Education) is a three year Erasmus+ KA2 partnership project (2023–2026) co-funded by the European Union that aims to advance early literacy development for young multilingual children, especially those aged 2–6 years who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including national, regional, migrant, and refugee minority language communities. The project addresses the fact that multilingual children often face unequal educational opportunities compared with monolingual peers, by promoting reading approaches that value and include all of a child's languages, rather than treating languages separately. It emphasises interactive and engaging book reading in multilingual contexts, encouraging positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity and support for home languages. Read with MEE brings together partners from the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, and Spain and collaborates with professionals and experts to ensure its outputs are grounded in the latest research on multilingual and early literacy development. Read with MEE seeks to strengthen knowledge, skills, and classroom/home practices that support inclusive and multilingual early literacy development across Europe.

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