English as a Second Language Students at International and English Language Schools
What Challenges Arise for Students?

by Carola Keil

Mother Tongue

Did you know that 21 February is the International Mother Language Day (proclaimed in 1999 by UNESCO)? Our world is getting more and more international, but “mother tongue education and multilingualism are increasingly accepted around the world, and speaking one’s own language is more and more a right” (UNESCO 2003).

Why is the mother tongue (MT) important for TCKs?

If children grow up outside the parents’ home country and they are educated at an international school, why not raise them to be global citizens (rather than Germans, for example)? Then the mother tongue is not so important, is it?

Identity—knowing where they belong. Language is a vital part of culture, and culture is a very important part of a person’s identity. Children need to learn the rules of their culture and the language. In their mother tongue, they can best express feelings and emotions. It is the parents’ responsibility to help children preserve their national identity, language, and culture. Preserving their national identity, language, and culture gives children a feeling of personal worth and self-esteem.

Reentry. For many TCKs who go to their country of citizenship to stay either after graduation or during their school years, their passport country is not really home; they are “secret immigrants.” But most children do not want to stand out. They try hard to be like everyone else (especially at school), and they need to at least be fluent in their mother tongue. The second language, English, suddenly loses its significance.

Further studies in their home country. Children might be fluent in their mother tongue in a social context (with family, friends, and so forth), but they might not have the vocabulary to acquire academic knowledge if they have not had formal teaching at their age level. One goal in TCK education should be to facilitate the transition of our children into the educational institutions of their country of citizenship.

Studies in a second language (at an international school). Research shows that “literacy in [the] mother tongue has a ‘cross-over’ effect in improving literacy in English. And not keeping up literacy in [one’s] mother tongue may lead to slower progress in English, and poorer results” (Vienna International School ESL and MT Department 2006).

What challenges arise for international MK schools and their teachers?

The numbers of ESL students are growing in MK schools around the world. While this is a positive development from one perspective, teachers might face the challenge of teaching a class in which a number of students have a limited understanding of English, and the school might fear a lower academic standard. What can the school do? It can either implement admission tests and turn down students who speak little English (a practice that might not be in line with the goal of serving the whole missions community) or implement, develop, and improve an ESL and MT programme.

Why ESL and Mother Tongue?

Why should children study ESL and their mother tongue? The Vienna International School ESL and MT Department, which is at the forefront of ESL and MT teaching, explains, “In order to assure that students will enjoy cognitive and academic success in their second language, English, a student’s first language system, oral and written, must be developed to a high cognitive level” (2006).
Meaningful communication. Academic knowledge must be processed in thinking. Cognitive abilities must be developed.

Low affective filter. An affective filter is a learning blockage that is due to a negative attitude such as anxiety, fear, frustration, or low self-esteem. For example, when we came to Germany, Tamara (grade 6) had the biggest problems with maths. She did not know the German terminology, the academic maths language. She felt frustrated and fearful. This high affective filter blocked her from understanding and learning new maths concepts. So she failed her first test and thought, “I’m bad at maths.” But it was rather a language problem. The same happens with ESL children at international schools: They sit in science class, and if they do not know the vocabulary, they will just feel frustrated and not even make an effort to actively take part. So this affective filter has to be lowered in order for a child to develop academically.

All these interrelated aspects promote one another. These aspects are the foundation for language proficiency, native and English. Clearly, we need ESL teachers at international schools. The ESL teacher and the content area teacher must cooperate as both plan their daily lessons. The content area teacher must inform the ESL teacher about the vocabulary that will be used during the content area lesson. With this vocabulary information, the ESL teacher can plan a lesson that provides opportunities for English language learners (ELLs) to listen, understand, speak, practice, read, and master the new words before they attend the content area lesson. If the ELLs are prepared during the ESL lessons, then those students will actively participate in the content area lessons because they will have the academic language to do so.

Students studying at international schools need to read and learn in their MT as well. At Murree Christian School in Pakistan, the teacher used ordinary German schoolbooks from the respective grade levels in her German classes. She offered German club as an afternoon fun activity once a week. German club included singing, stories, cooking, movies, discussions, games, youth culture, and German holidays.

What are the benefits of an ESL and MT programme for a school?

- An ESL and MT programme enriches the cultural and linguistic diversity of a school.
- An ESL and MT programme provides a higher academic level for all students.
- The school can offer a wider variety of second languages. Most mother tongue teachers will be willing to teach their language as a second or third language to English MT students. Bilingual students who have achieved high-level and well-balanced skills in two or more languages are recognised to be more effective thinkers and problem solvers than in all contexts—home, school, community, and the broader society—and how these feed into the student’s language. The following social and cultural processes provide a base for the “legs,” which are important for language proficiency:

Language development. Language development is the acquisition of the oral and written systems of the student’s first and second languages in all the language domains—grammar, vocabulary, phonology, semantics, and so forth.

Cognitive development. Cognitive development is the development of conceptual and analytic thought.

Academic development. Academic development includes all schoolwork in the various subjects. In each succeeding grade, academic work dramatically expands the vocabulary and language patterns to higher cognitive levels. This knowledge transfers from the first language to the second language.

The “legs” are interrelated:

Comprehensible input. Without language, thinking is impossible.
monolinguals. MT teachers can also be very supportive as bilingual specialists interacting with the ESL teacher.

• The school can be in line with other international schools and requirements around the world. In 2001, the ESL committee of the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) officially changed its name to the ESL and Mother Tongue Committee to incorporate mother tongue learning as part of its mandate.

In his book *Bilingualism in International Schools*, Maurice Carder says that “the second language programme should be at the centre of an International School curriculum, not on the periphery; all staff should be aware of the issues involved ... In this way, an International School will be truly international, and can avoid being seen as an English-speaking school with an exotic influx of non-English speakers” (2007, 32).

**Recommendations to Schools**

- Increase awareness more generally in schools of the need for specialist personnel, training, programmes, and materials to support ESL learners.
- Implement, develop, and improve an English as a second language and mother tongue programme (to see an example, visit http://school.vis.ac.at/esl to learn about the ESL and MT department at Vienna International School).
- Include ESL and mother tongue study in the school and homework timetable.
- Raise awareness of the great importance and the benefits of mother tongue maintenance in teachers, school staff, parents, and students.
- Encourage families to take steps to keep the mother tongue and their home culture alive and well.
- Teach families how to prepare their children for an English medium school.
- For all school staff, insist on TCK pre-field orientation (PFO).
- Aim at recruiting MT teachers for MT lessons and cultural activities and as bilingual support staff. If no teachers are available, then allocate time to study in the mother tongue using a correspondence course or an online course.
- Take advantage of special courses for all school staff as part of PFO or continuing professional teacher development (see the Professional Teacher Development section below).

**Professional Teacher Development**

- The European Council of International Schools (ECIS), www.ecis.org/aboutus.asp, is “a collaborative network promoting the ideals and best practice of international education.” The ESL and Mother Tongue Committee of ECIS also publishes a newsletter: www.ecis.org/esl.asp.
- The Department of Education and Children’s Services, South Australia, offers Unlocking the World, a series of professional development programmes for classroom teachers. Tutors go to host schools around the world and train teachers. Visit www.unlockingtheworld.com for more information.

**Resources**

- The book *Bilingualism in International Schools: A Model for Enriching Language Education*, written by Maurice Carder and published by Multilingual Matters in 2007, is a very informative read for ESL teachers, all school staff, parents, and administrators. To preview the book, visit www.multilingual-matters.com and type the title in the Search box. Click on the appropriate link provided in the results of the search. Various other interesting books on the subject can be found on the Multilingual Matters site as well.
- Krashen.com is a great website that has current news and views on ESL and bilingual education: http://sd.krashen.com.

**References**


Carola Keil specialized in language development during her training as a kindergarten teacher. In 1992, she moved to Pakistan, where she homeschooled her children. Later, her children attended Murree Christian School, where Mrs. Keil served on the board. Since returning to Germany in 2003, she has worked with MK Care Germany.