

Language learning which reflects family traditions

Karen Faux finds out how children at the Azbuka Russian-English bilingual school in west London move effortlessly between two languages, building confidence in core subjects and exploring different cultures.

The Azbuka Russian-English bilingual school in west London is a very special place. Not only do children acquire fluency in two languages but they also have the opportunity to learn and participate in both cultures. With children attending from a mix of families for whom the first language is not only Russian or English, but also German, French and Thai, this makes for a rich and fascinating learning environment. Most children who attend are bilingually developed from birth.

Founder and headteacher, Maria Garilova, says: 'We believe that the best education should link to the linguistic and cultural profile of the child's family. At Azbuka children learn and acquire not just another language, but they also experience rich cultural traditions. This is vital for their development, academic achievement and happiness.'

'Immersion' approach

The Azbuka Russian-English Nursery was the first Russian nursery in England to register with Ofsted in 2002. In September 2015, founder and headteacher, Maria Gavrilova, achieved her dream of expanding her nursery into an independent school, and opened the doors of its new premises, close to Mortlake Station.

The fee-paying school, which currently has 25 nursery and



reception children, is managed by the Azbuka Foundation, (a charity with eight trustees – some from Russian and some from the English background), and its income is supplemented by grants and charitable donations that support bilingual education for all families, regardless of income. The school includes a cultural centre and a Saturday school and Bilingual Education Resource for the wider community.

Its team of seven EYFS teachers all speak English and Russian and follow a bilingual education programme which uses an 'immersion' approach.

In essence this means that children do not learn a language as a subject, but instead learn and develop in all areas of learning through dual languages. After beginning with Russian in pre-school, English is introduced across all learning areas in reception. From year 1, core subjects are taught with an equal split in both languages. This makes for lively learning.

Competitive spirit

Reception year English teacher Sue Judge prioritises on maths and English, using a combination of games, arts and crafts, songs, stories, online resources and more



traditional learning activities to support the use of English, alongside children's developing Russian.



She reports that board games are perfect for teaching maths. ‘Children read off the numbers on the dice and move their counters around the board using English numbers and simple English phrases to comment on the game. Caught up in their own competitive spirit, they make astonishing progress without conscious effort.’

Ms Judge reports that parents receive regular updates about their children’s progress. ‘Every two weeks parents receive an email about a particular topic we are covering maths, literacy, particular books or poems that we are covering in both languages. It is important that they have a clear idea about what children are working on in school and are able to contribute to that at home.’

Science area

Alena Taylor is a teacher with a designated specialism in the EYFS learning area, knowledge and understanding of the world, and this underpins her approach to science. She says: ‘Children love our science

area. We learn about texture, smells, the physics of certain processes and lots more. For our experiments we use food colourings, essences from different plants, borax, all sorts of flour, vinegar and soda bicarbonate.

‘It is also great for children to learn about what is all around us, through our nature projects where we use natural objects such as branches, bark, leaves and all sorts of garden produce including soil. We conduct a lot of experiments with food. For example, we look at how to make porridge, investigate what jelly is made of, and how eggs behave in different conditions. Another favourite is investigating ice – melting it, freezing it, digging treasures out of it, colouring it and sailing on it.’

Ms Taylor emphasises that it is not only about exciting projects but the language that we use to describe the details. Commenting on processes and naming objects and components is an important part of this, along with counting, weighing and using

maths skills. ‘Children interact with each other, learn about social skills, and learn to be patient and precise,’ she says.

Russian theatre

Traditional Russian theatre is an aspect of Russian culture which Azbuka enjoys introducing children to.

Nursery teacher Oksana Pavlykivska says: ‘We have a little theatre and all kinds of puppets in the classroom available for all children at any time, which we use a lot. It is amazing how much children enjoy being part of a play, or using puppets to communicate, learn fairy tales and stories.

‘It is interesting to witness their debate while choosing the character they are going to play and adopting the voice and character of the part they are playing. There are so many benefits – children develop oral skills, the ability to listen and take turns, and use their imagination and knowledge of Russian and English characters to create stories of their own.’

She adds: ‘Just two days ago our older children performed a little story for teachers and their younger classmates which everyone enjoyed so much, not to mention the pride of the performers themselves!’

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