



News > Education > Education News

Teaching in tongues: the bilingual pre-school tapping new potential

Introducing the first officially accredited Russian-speaking bilingual nursery in Britain

Richard Garner | Tuesday 31 December 2013 | 3 comments



Maria Gavrilova reads with Arina Ochotnikova, 3, at the Azbuka Foundation Nursery in Richmond *Teri Pengilly*

The children in this nursery in the leafy London suburb of Richmond are busy acting out a story about a bear in a forest. Stage directions, however, are being given to them by their teacher in Russian.

This daycare centre for under-fives is unique in the UK, being the first Russian-speaking bilingual nursery in the country to be officially registered by education standards watchdog Ofsted.



The centre, run by the Azbuka Foundation, attracts parents from miles away as a result of the dearth of alternatives – there is a two-year waiting list to register a child.

Svetlana Ochetnikova, who teaches there and whose own three-year-old daughter Arina also attends, travels in from Crystal Palace – about an hour away – every day.

“It’s marvellous,” she said. “Arina loves it. She was very surprised when she first came here. She’d heard her parents speaking Russian at home but she just said: ‘Look mummy, all the children here are speaking Russian!’”

Maria Gavrilova, the proprietor, who also teaches at the centre, believes the Government is missing a trick by not promoting more bilingual nursery centres or schools.

“There are so many people in the UK who are bilingual – Polish, Urdu, a whole host of languages,” she said. “It is not like the Middle Ages where you’re stuck in your village and live there for the rest of your life. There was no difficulty in getting people to help teach here – there are lots of Russian speakers out there.”

It would, she argues, be the same for other languages and that would help erase the UK’s reputation as a linguistic desert.

The benefits, she says, are that bilingual children can start to learn about both cultures at the same time – instead of languishing in a monoglot setting and have to make up on the second language in any spare time parents have at home.

Most of the children come from bilingual homes where one parent is Russian and the other English – though some have parents with no Russian connections at all, who still see the value of a bilingual start to their children’s education.

Russian is the lead language of the centre, although those children who do not speak much Russian go through a “scaffolding” initiative where they are taught by being shown objects they recognise.

Ms Gavrilova, however, is worried that her children may lose out when they reach school age as there will be no-one to help with Russian.

As one parent said of her son: “He is embarrassed speaking Russian to me when I am in his English school – no-one else speaks Russian so he feels excluded.”

Another added: “My child’s amazing bilingual abilities and skills are not valued, used or developed in his English-only school.”

The foundation, an independent charity, is running a complimentary school on Saturdays for around 60 older children to keep up their Russian studies.

Some of its students have gone on to obtain GCSEs in Russian – gaining A* grades three years earlier than students in mainstream schools.

The Foundation is aiming to offer a full-time education at its complimentary school in future and to set up a club, through which it can stage cultural events and activities. However, it is still searching for full-time premises.

The Government can point to a growth in the number of bilingual primary schools as a result of its free school programme – there are French, German and Spanish schools in operation.

In addition, it is making languages compulsory from the age of seven in state primary schools for the first time ever from next September.

However, such actions are too little, Ms Gavrilova feels. “Our children are set to grow up in a world where their sense of normality is very different from ours,” says the brochure outlining its plans. “Their ability to adapt and adjust will be the difference between success and failure.

“It’s why the behemoth of the British education system is increasingly not the answer to our children’s needs.”

At a time when the British Academy claims that too few of our ambassadors speak the language of the country they are serving in, it seems a valid point to raise.

More about: | [Castles](#) | [Family And Parenting](#) | [Linguistics](#) | [Middle Ages](#) | [Poland](#) | [Primary School](#) | [Russia](#) | [Schools](#) | [Spain](#) | [UK](#)