

Get them

Hazel Bennett explains the key role of TAs in welcoming pupils whose first language is not English

MORE THAN one in eight children in English primary schools now have English as a second language and in some parts of London it is more than two thirds.

As more and more pupils arrive in schools knowing very little English, teaching assistants become increasingly important in the role of helping pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) to settle into their new way of life, to develop a sense of belonging and to learn.

What is going on in the pupil's head?

Starting a new school can be daunting for pupils, even when they can speak English, they have been to school before and they understand what school is all about. If a child has never been to school, and is not accustomed to the British way of life and cannot understand what everyone is saying, it can be terrifying.

Why is learning more difficult for EAL pupils?

English speaking pupils acquire new concepts using familiar language. They also learn foreign languages using familiar concepts. Pupils for whom English is the second or third language have to use unfamiliar language to acquire unfamiliar concepts. Since their task is doubly difficult, they need extra explanation and practice.

Learning can be frustrating for them because they often understand and want to show their knowledge or ask questions, but cannot do so because of their lack of English.

So how do you help?

The first task is to help them settle in. Try to keep it at the front of your mind that these children may be anxious about their future. They may also be shell-shocked, literally shell-shocked, as some



A baking session can provide a good opportunity to get Key Stage 1 children chatting

have come from war-torn places and their families may have suffered. Patience is as important as expertise.

They all go through a quiet phase when they understand a lot but are reluctant to try to speak. The quiet phase can be as short as a few days or, in rare cases, as long as a year. It is important to be patient and to continue to talk and explain. Often the pupil is benefiting more than you realise.

When the pupils do start speaking, it is better not to point out every error in grammar as this deters them from speaking. Just let them see you are pleased that they are trying and they will continue to do so.

Bilingual pupils who speak the new pupil's mother tongue can translate for them for the first few days, so they will settle more quickly. Also ask bilingual pupils to chat to them to find out how much they know. They can ask if they have been to school in their own country and can help you establish whether they can read or write their own language and how much maths they have learnt.