

Mehr Sprache. [More language].

Early encouragement of language and multilingualism – a challenge for families and children’s educational establishments

A programme run by

okay.zusammen leben/project centre for immigration and integration

The crucial foundations for an individual’s language skills are laid in childhood. Because of this awareness, a special significance is attached to the encouragement of language development in children for families and early years education establishments. The central strategies of the *mehr Sprache [more language]* programme are targeted at these two system fields. *Early encouragement of language and multilingualism – a challenge for families and children’s educational establishments.*

Initial situation

The following information forms the background for the development of the programme:

- Language skills are increasingly considered to be key skills for an individual for social demands today and in the near future. Language is the central instrument both for the increasingly cooperative organisation of production in the economy and society (post-Ford production forms), as well as handling the increasing mutual dependence between individuals and institutions when it comes to coping with responsibilities.
- In this respect, a particular challenge is posed by the linguistic integration of immigrants and their families. According to several international studies in many European countries, children with an immigration background exhibit significantly poorer linguistic performance (for instance when it comes to measuring reading ability) than children of the same age whose family language is the national language. However, societies in Europe can and should not fail to exploit the full educational potential of this group because of their demographic development and in the spirit of their equal opportunities ethos.
- Nowadays, bilingualism or multilingualism are no longer just a description for the initial situation of many children who enter our education system. (In pre-schools in Vorarlberg at the moment, 24% of children have a family language other than German.) Multilingualism is also increasingly being perceived as having a great social potential because of growing trans-nationalisation in all fields of life. Developing multilingualism in European societies is a recognised target of the EU education and culture policy. Preservation and maintenance of the immigrant languages are also a central tenet of the list of objectives in these programmes.

Answers to new challenges

The *mehr Sprache [more language]* programme’s lines of attack formulate preliminary answers to the issues outlined above.

- Acquiring a language under multilingual conditions as extensive and virulent as this is a new subject in both a scientific and a public sense. Vorarlberg needs programmes and strategies to be able to tap into this knowledge production and implement the knowledge

in appropriate forms on all relevant levels (teacher training and development, work and consultation with parents, publicity).

- As regards encouraging language in children whose native language is not German, there are now good methodical answers to this specific issue in children's educational establishments, which have increasingly been tried and tested. Educational experts in children's educational institutions need the right packages and organisational vessels to acquire these methods and develop them in successful practice in this matter. These methods not only incorporate the initial multilingual situation of these children to support them as they acquire the national language; the target is also supporting bilingualism in the sense of preserving it and developing multilingualism. All children can and should profit from this increased awareness of language development and multilingualism.

- In line with the awareness that the crucial foundations for an individual's language skills are laid in childhood, a key role is attached to parents and families in this situation. Language development under the conditions of bilingualism and multilingualism is a new theme and a new challenge for parents from an immigration background as well. Sometimes they have to confront it without having appropriate educational experience themselves. So, specifically-targeted parent education packages are necessary, which as a consequence will contribute to children with an immigration background entering schools with a better language premise than before.

Specific programme tracks and products

Programme track 1: "Bridge builders"

The "Bridge builders" programme aims to make use of the special skills of people with an immigration background (bilingualism, multicultural skills) for communicating between parents and teachers, and thus for developing a good educational partnership between the family home and the school. Childcare institutions, pre-schools, schools and parental advisory institutions can book interpreters for parents' consultations and parents' evenings. Furthermore education experts receive advice in questions regarding work with parents from an immigration background. A translation service for invitations to parents' evenings and for parents' information materials helps them to reach their target audience.

Programme track 2: "Words like honey/Parental education for early acquisition of language"

The programme promotes the development of advisory skills with regard to the issue of "Early language acquisition under multilingual conditions" for parents. A training course specifically developed for these issues is aimed at people who already work with or support parents, as well as people who are interested in this field of work and want to become active in new advisory environments (e.g. in immigrant organisations). 50% of participants in previous courses have an immigration background and can access the immigration communities easily. Furthermore a bilingual parents' guide on the subject of "How can I encourage my child's language development" has been produced. It is distributed free of charge in the language combinations Turkish-German, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian-German, Russian-German and Spanish-German throughout Vorarlberg: in educational establishments, parents' advisory centres, local authorities, immigrant organisations etc. A "Materials Pack for Early Language Learning" for parents with games, multilingual

children's books etc. including a specific handout for parents (again in bilingual editions) is distributed through public libraries to the target group of parents with an immigration background. The parents' guide and materials pack also form the basis of actual parent work conducted by trained advisors. As of autumn 2009 local authorities, immigrant associations and other involved parties will be able to order parent education packages on language acquisition, multilingualism and encouragement of a reading/writing culture within families from an adult education centre in Vorarlberg, and then use them on their own premises.

Programme tracks 3 and 4: Skill training "Language acquisition under multilingual conditions" for education experts in pre-schools and 1st and 2nd class primary schools
Development and implementation of a curriculum-based further education course for education experts who are involved with the encouragement of language at pre-school and primary level. It supplies methods and tools for encouraging language. Furthermore, an advisory structure has been established to deal with questions that arise in practice.

Programme track 5: Increasing general awareness of language as a key skill in the context of a social transformation process

The lecture series "mehrsprachig. Wegweiser zur Kommunikation im 21. Jahrhundert" (multilingual. A signpost to communication in the 21st century) accompanies the *mehr Sprache [more language]* programme and creates a forum for discussion and communication for current developments and debates in language politics. In a series of seven lectures, scientists, economists and language artists (writers, musicians and rappers) provide design and orientation signposts for the contemporary politics of language and education. And they provide access to a public discussion that has the opportunities and risks of multilingualism in our globally-networked societies as its main theme.

Info-Box

Contracting authority:

Vorarlberg federal state government, on behalf of the Vorarlberg Landtag (state parliament) based on a decision made by all 4 political parties represented in the Landtag.

Concept and project management:

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