



# Little linguists

Naomi Bartholomew OF ST CATHERINE'S PREP, BRAMLEY, ON HOW TO FOSTER A LOVE FOR LANGUAGE AT AN EARLY AGE

**C**hildren are natural linguists – they are able to mimic sounds and reproduce even the most unfamiliar with apparent ease. This is an essential part of cognitive development up until the age of about eight years, hence, it is important to maximise opportunities in pre-school and the early years to enable children to explore this area of their learning. Just as children are able to sing back the lyrics of *Frozen* or retell a complicated nursery rhyme, so too are they able to speak with apparent ease in a second language, and are much more likely to be able to hear and repeat back phrases in more authentic accents.

At St Catherine's, we ensure the girls have fun listening to French and Spanish stories, songs, rhymes and phrases. This can be done in short bursts of 10 to 15 minute sessions, and there are an array of online resources to help. We also

try to link language learning to other areas of study. Our Year 1 pupils enjoy their French café and Year 2 learn some Spanish alongside their study of Mexico.

Studies show that language learning at this age benefits memory, flexibility of thought, critical and creative thinking. There are also the wider benefits of cultural awareness and a deeper understanding of others. By eight years old the ability to reproduce new sounds is much reduced and pupils can then seemingly display more reticence and become more self-conscious. So it's very beneficial to have explored language in the Pre-Prep years.

Wherever possible, it is also essential to celebrate the languages of those within each class – exchanging greetings or learning to sing *Happy Birthday* to each other are good examples of this. For those children who are fortunate to

be bi- or even trilingual, it is important for their languages to be acknowledged and for there to be chances for them to share their languages with others. Research suggests that for those pupils who switch language at the school gate, there needs to be recognition by their teacher that this is the case. Simply exchanging a morning greeting and farewell in their home language can be a very powerful tool and help the child to feel acknowledged and valued. Once pupils start to write more there can be the occasional syntax which does not translate, but this can easily be explained as each child becomes more fluent in their written work. If unsure which is your child's dominant language it can be helpful to ask them which language they dream in as this can be an indicator.

Language brings an enrichment to early years learning which is to be embraced. **1**