

Our journey towards a 50:50 English / Spanish programme

Context:

We are a three form entry state funded free school with over 600 pupils. The vast majority of our pupils do not have any Spanish speakers in their families, though some do. Currently, the pupils in Early Years and KKey Stage 1 (4-7 years old) have a balanced programme with half of the curriculum taught in each language. Across the rest of the school, we teach PE, Music, art, Design and Technology and Science in Spanish as well as daily Spanish literacy which we treat as a core subject. We do not teach English or Maths in Spanish in the school. Our staff come from a range of backgrounds with regard to Spanish language competency. The vast majority of class based teaching assistants are native speakers of the language and teachers and most other staff are all learning the language if not already fully bilingual. We know that being a great teacher is the most important thing for our children's education followed by a willingness to engage in our programme, together with determination to learn the language.

Our journey towards a 50:50 bilingual immersion programme... the story so far.

The school was opened as a state funded Free school in September 2012. The vision of the founders was to have an inclusive, state funded bilingual school with an open admissions policy that any child in the city of Brighton and Hove could attend. This was and is a unique and extremely ambitious vision. Though there are a handful of other state funded bilingual schools in the country, most started around the same time or since 2012, and none share the same context.

Since then, the school has grown from just 3 classes (approximately 90 children) to a full 3 form entry school with around 620 pupils between the ages of 4 and 11 years old.

The commitment to bilingual education has not wavered since opening, though the curriculum and pedagogy has gone through a number of changes as the school has overcome numerous obstacles during its first 10 years being the first of its kind.

In the early days, a flexible approach with high levels of immersion suited the relatively small school that it was at the time. As the school grew, and to comply with the various national priorities exemplified by the Ofsted inspection regime, national testing requirements and the National Curriculum, there was a need to focus on building strong systems for curriculum, teaching and learning. These resulted in BPS being one of the highest attaining schools in the area including a large number of children achieving great success in GCSE Spanish at just 11 years old. These changes had led to the streamlining of the bilingual offer in the school to between 10% and 15% of learning time in school.

By 2019, with the solid foundations of the school and curriculum well established the trustees decided it was time to move the school towards a greater level of bilingualism with the aim of children living, breathing thinking and dreaming in two languages with the ability to fluently communicate and understand in a wide range of contexts. A review of the programme was commissioned from an international expert in bilingual education- Norman Sieweke, who spent a week in the school and produced a report with concrete suggestions of how to move the programme on. It was just after this, in September 2020, that I joined the school as headteacher.

Development of the new Bilingual Strategy:

During the 2020-21 school year with a work group composed of: governors including parents; staff; and our bilingual education adviser: Norman Siewek, we developed a five year strategy to advance our bilingual programme towards a 50:50 Spanish English education model by the end of 2025.

The following year (2021-22) we started by embedding changes throughout the school in the teaching of Music and Art through Spanish. This also involved a complete review of our curriculum in each area including professional development for staff in each subject area, investing in resources and lots of opportunities to support, coach and reflect on practice as a team. It was also the first year where the Reception cohort of pupils had 50:50 Spanish English provision.

In December 2021 we were visited by Ofsted which gave the opportunity to test how the English educational establishment would respond to our ambitious plan. They were suitably impressed and tacitly endorsed our strategy to use bilingual learning to strengthen learning across the curriculum with a sustainable pace of change. ([Ofsted Report](#)).



Recent developments:

During the 2022-23 school year, the children from our first 50:50 cohort moved into year 1 where we developed a 50:50 Spanish English curriculum to continue their progress and the first dual immersion cohort through the school. This has been supported by senior leaders; our bilingual consultant and by providing extra release time for staff to plan collaboratively and learn from successes.

We also started teaching all of our PE throughout the school in Spanish from September 2022 and all of the Design and Technology in Spanish from February 2023. Again, this has been accompanied by complete reviews of the curriculum in each subject, investment in resources and professional development activities for all staff.

delegation came for a day in March 2023 including members of the Welsh government, Local authority leaders, and senior staff and governors from the soon-to-open school.

They were suitably impressed by the learning in Spanish and pupils' attitudes and skills in Spanish learning across the school. On seeing the reality against our strategic plan, they commented that they felt we had already surpassed where we intended to be by this stage in developments. They saw classes, looked at books, spoke with children and met with leaders, including our pupils leaders in the school council and Spanish ambassador teams



During the last couple of years we have also been involved in the development of the Bilingual Education Alliance of England which is a new network of schools and educators engaged in bilingual education in the country. We have members from state and private schools as well as academics, consultants and those involved in embassy education. This has helped with school self-evaluation and reflection as well as supporting others while building a platform to ensure that the value of bilingual education in the country is well represented in future.



We constantly monitor the standard of learning in school, including the quality of bilingual education. Recent monitoring has shown a marked improvement not only in the children's skills and attitudes across the 4 skills in Spanish, but also in the quality of learning in subjects taught through Spanish. For example, the renewed focus on the teaching of art is evident in the quality of work and clarity of the learning journey in Art sketchbooks across the school. Similarly, the breadth and depth of learning in Design & Technology has clearly progressed since the launch of the revised curriculum taught through Spanish. This is not to say that this journey has been easy or plain sailing, but the unwavering commitment and motivation of our amazing staff team have ensured that we see success.

Key lessons learned so far

Though we are still very much on a journey developing our programme in line with the bilingual strategy, we have learned some key lessons along the way which have contributed to the success we have experienced so far:

Blocking time

While increasing the number of subjects and other instances for immersive learning in Spanish, we have found that this works best when these sessions can be timetabled next to each other in the school week. Children make the switch to learning in Spanish, then become increasingly confident when this is extended for more than a single lesson block.

Concentration looks different

When learning in L2 (Spanish) there are times that pupils will appear more passive, quietly listening with expressions on their faces that might be perceived as them not engaging. When learning in L2, pupils are often working even harder cognitively to create meaning with the language they understand and interpret instructions. Their body language can portray lower levels of understanding, but when required to complete tasks putting the teaching session into practice, the children engage immediately and effectively demonstrate understanding. When asked in English what they have to do they are able to explain concisely.

The staff team

Moving towards teaching subjects through Spanish has been a huge challenge for staff. Teaching to the national curriculum in line with best practice in English schools through Spanish, which is the second language for the vast majority of pupils and most teachers, is highly demanding. To ensure success, we have supported staff to take risks and encouraged high levels of professional reflection. It has been important that staff voices are listened to at each stage of programme development and that we give time and support to enable them to prepare and plan carefully for each new session to be taught through Spanish. That said, it is only due to their own commitment and professionalism that we have been able to enjoy such success so far and we are extremely grateful to have such an amazing team!

A good bilingual curriculum is a good curriculum - full stop!

The need to rehearse the steps in learning, keeping in mind that it is experienced by learners who are still learning the language, has meant that we have had to be extremely focussed on the key learning in each subject area taught through Spanish. This has meant our curriculum has an increasing focus on the core skills and concepts in each subject based on the depth and breadth of the English National Curriculum. This highly focussed curriculum enables language and scaffolds to be carefully selected and planned for. The impact on this for the subjects which we have started to teach wholly through Spanish so far is raised standards of attainment and clearer subject specific learning journeys in the pupils' work.

Motivation is everything

For staff and pupils alike, we have aimed to create a culture where all attempts to create meaning in Spanish is valued throughout the school day. We don't have strict rules for pupils to only use the target language in subject lessons, however, through encouragement and scaffolded support we have seen a marked increase in the pupils' use of Spanish in class. The same principles are applied to staff and various formal and informal communications in Spanish for Spanish learning staff have increased, which has also anecdotally shown an

increase in children's willingness to take risks in their use of the language when they see adults doing the same.

We are looking forward to building on successes so far to take the next steps in the realisation of our strategy and vision towards 50:50 English Spanish learning across the school. We have come so far because of such a dedicated team of staff, governors, parents and, of course, our fantastic children. Watch this space!

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