

Helping Parents who Do not Speak English

Beijing school gets to grips with a key demographic

By *Ettie Zilber*

Our "international" schools boast anywhere between 1 and 80 different nationalities under one roof. As a result, we are adept at developing our students' English language proficiency while they are in our care. But what about their parents?

It is not an anomaly for us to have a segment of the parent population who do not speak English. Typically, it is the working parent who is more likely to be the English-speaker, but the non-working parent might have a limited level of English, or no English at all. Thus, we are faced with a significant communication challenge.

If we believe that collaboration and communication between the school and the parents is key to student success, then it would be in the best interest of our students to overcome this challenge.

Our school, Beijing BISS International School, has introduced a variety of strategies to mitigate the challenge, including the following:

1. Creating glossaries of key words, using visuals, and speaking slowly at presentations and meetings.
2. Hiring teachers who are fluent in some other languages than English.
3. Establishing English classes for parents.

4. Targeting specific language groups for "sheltered" meetings or presentations.

A constant in-house debate has been whether to translate all text materials into the languages of the majority groups. We have decided against this, because we are concerned that it might become an equity issue for those whose languages we cannot translate.

Of all the strategies, the English classes have had the greatest long-term success. One mother, after two years of classes, became President of the PTA and recently gave her first speech in front of an audience. We were as proud of her as she was of herself!

We feel, as you do, that it is important to ensure good communication between the school and the family. We are sure that other schools are also dealing with this common issue. It is time to share your strategies! ●

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