

# AMPLIFYING CHILDREN'S VOICES AND EXPANDING SPACES FOR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE LEARNING



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**Maria:** "I liked writing the big book of recipes because it looks good"

**Katia:** "I liked baking the things because we don't quite bake very often in school"

**Alex:** "I really liked the art we were doing, the creative stuff, it's fun. I just like painting and drawing"

Maria, Katia and Alex are in Year 2 at Azbuka International School in London. Azbuka uniquely delivers the curriculum in Russian and English and strives to meet the educational, cultural, linguistic and social needs of children between the ages of 2 and 12 and their families. It enables children to thrive in an educational environment secure in their bilingual and bicultural identities. Children enjoy a broad, culture-rich, creative and academically stimulating curriculum with the aim of achieving their full potential.

Above they were talking about what they liked best about the 2024 whole-school bilingual project, to which children across the school actively contributed. The project involved language and literacy activities which enhanced the development of both of their school languages, Russian and English.

Underpinning the whole-school bilingual project is project-based learning (PBL), a student-centred, inquiry-based approach that encourages children to investigate complex questions and address real-life challenges that are meaningful to them. At the centre are children's interests, desires and abilities. They work together to design and carry out a series of tasks and activities, culminating in the creation of a final product that they share with an audience. This year children presented their different texts and artefacts to parents and friends at a whole-school community celebration - the **Silk Road Exhibition and Bazaar**.

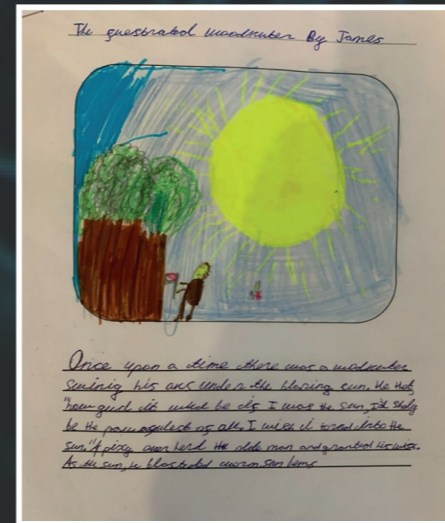
This year's focus was on discovering Central Asian countries located along the Silk Road. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have had long and strong historical ties with Russia, and, in some, Russian - a colonial legacy - continues to be spoken alongside other languages. Moreover, several children at Azbuka and their families have a Central Asian heritage which gives the project a personal resonance.

PBL can integrate effectively both language and content learning. It can amplify opportunities for language and literacy development and connect learning that takes place in the classroom with the world beyond its walls. Children are actively involved in all stages of the project, are motivated to learn new content, develop new skills and nurture their autonomy, creativity, criticality and self-reflection. Below, we present some indicative examples of how children took ownership of, and pride in, their learning and invested in ideas that were important to them.

Year 4 students and their English teacher Paul created their own stories inspired by the Silk Road Fables. They first listened to the tales being read aloud from the Silk Road Fables on the OLogy website of the American Museum of Natural History <https://www.amnh.org/explore/ology/anthropology/silk-road-fables2> Then, they discussed as a class how they might adapt them to inspire their own versions. Mira's comments show how she approached her story writing:

*'I changed the original events when the lion fell in the well and drowned, to my character, the tiger who entered a cave, and the other animals trapped him inside. It was hard to think of words that were suitable and different to the original story. I liked writing the story and then listening to other classmates' stories. We learned different stories from other cultures.'*

They planned their tales, deciding on which parts of their stories to write in English or Russian, then published them with illustrations, in their own book *Stories from the Silk Road*.



Finally, they memorised their tales and retold them to parents and friends at the Silk Road Exhibition and Bazaar.

James talks about the importance of building confidence to narrate a story in public: 'I wrote a story called 'The Frustrated Woodcutter' based on 'The Stonecutter'. I split the story into four parts, two I wrote in English and two in Russian. I changed the story so instead of the cloud blocking the sun, the moon blocked the sun and that he was a woodcutter, not a stonecutter. I really liked making up new ideas and I was excited to tell the story to the parents and children. The most difficult part was not being afraid to present the stories and being brave enough to go on the stage to tell my story.'

Year 5 and Year 6 students and their Russian teacher Lena explored loan words from Persian, Uzbek and Tadjik that have been adopted, or adapted in Russian.

As the children read and listened to traditional fairy tales and poems from Central Asia in Russian, they identified and collected unknown words, researching their meaning and creating a bank of loanwords. Using these, they then created a picture dictionary with



the meaning of the words and photographs they had selected and collectively agreed on, alongside bilingual riddle cards in Russian and English which they displayed at the Exhibition and Bazaar. They also used these new words to draft their own fairy tales.

Leo elaborated on how this expanded his awareness of the connections between different languages:

'We learned about words that came from languages in Central Asia into the Russian language. We made guessing cards with descriptions of these words. There were different meanings, and it was exciting to find out what words came from other languages. Before that we didn't know that words we were using were actually from a language like Tajik. We gave a description of the words to our classmates, and they tried to guess which word we were talking about. We used words like *bahcha* which means field, *ishak* - donkey and *kishmish* - a sort of dried grapes, raisins. We translated the riddles into English so other students could understand. It was really fun because we got to guess, and it was like a game... it was not only part of learning it was a small fun game'

Year 2 and Year 3 students worked with English teacher Nadia and Russian teacher Tanya to delve into the culinary traditions of Central Asia. They researched traditional recipes in both English and Russian and made dumplings and pumpkin pie following these recipes at school. They then created their own bilingual recipe book, featuring, for instance, *lagman* (a traditional Kirgiz dish with vegetables, noodles, meat and spices) to showcase their newly acquired language and cultural knowledge.

After that they devised an interactive game where children handled and smelled various spices and herbs and guessed what they were. Following this multisensory activity, each child chose a herb and a spice to research. Katia explains how they created bilingual labels:

'We wrote about herbs and spices bilingually. In the front we have the names of the spices in English and Russian and then inside we wrote about them'

In addition, the children crafted objects for the dinner table, such as tablecloths, napkins and bowls, decorating them using stencils. These creative activities enhanced their appreciation of the rich cultures and traditions of the Silk Road.

Reflecting on the gains the whole-group bilingual project offered to the children, Nadia picked out collaboration towards a common goal, and peer-learning:

'The highlight for many students was the opportunity to contribute individual efforts towards a collective outcome. Creating items for the school bazaar, they learned the value of teamwork. We observed notable improvements in their communication skills too.'

The emphasis on cooperation over individual achievement was clear as children worked together to create the texts and artefacts which they proudly displayed at the school **Silk Road Exhibition and Bazaar**.

As Maria, Alex and Katia put it: 'each of us did a little bit' and 'we put it all together'. They helped each other when they didn't understand a word by 'saying it in Russian and English' or 'just pointing and describing it'. In crafting 'we helped each other making things'.

Special thanks to Maria, Katia, Alex, Mira, James and Leo for sharing their insights into the whole-school bilingual Russian-English project. <https://www.azbukafoundation.org/>



A fuller version of this article including references can be found in LT Extra: <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/languages-today/languages-today-extra-content/>