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BILINGUALISM MATTERS

WHY EARLY EXPOSURE TO LANGUAGES IS GOOD FOR CHILDREN'S BRAINS

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Language, languages, and multilingualism

- Bilingual/multilingual = someone who uses more than one language on a regular basis.

- Knowing more than one language since childhood improves the brain in a significant way.

- Learning languages and encouraging multilingualism in children = investing on better brains!

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Many people believe that….

"BILINGUAL CHILDREN ARE CONFUSED"

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Many people also believe that….

"BILINGUALISM SLOWS DOWN THE CHILD'S GENERAL DEVELOPMENT"

"BILINGUALISM IS USEFUL ONLY IF BOTH LANGUAGES ARE WIDELY SPOKEN"

There are no foundations to these ideas!
Research has shown that the opposite is true

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Language skills and literacy

- Bilinguals have two language systems in their brain and spontaneously "notice" how language works.

And so…

- Bilingual children are better language learners
- Bilingual children tend to be better readers: good reading abilities in one language help learning to read in the other.

(Bialystok 2007; Luk & Bialystok 2010)

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Awareness of other people's points of view

- Bilingual children learn to choose the right language and language behaviour depending on who they are talking with.

And so….

- Bilingual children understand at an earlier age that other people may have a different perspective from their own.

(Goetz 2003; Kovács 2009)

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Attention and mental flexibility

- The two languages of bilinguals are always active: bilinguals have to 'filter out' one language when they speak the other.

And so…

- Bilingual children have
  - enhanced focused attention and ability to ignore distractions
  - better ability to monitor behaviour
  - better flexibility to adapt to new tasks

(Green 1998; Costa et a. 2008; Treccani et al. 2009)

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Bilingualism = Much more than two languages

- Bilingual children tend to:

  - have better spontaneous knowledge of language structure
  - have enhanced reading skills
  - learn other languages more easily
  - have better awareness of other people's points of view
  - have enhanced focused attention and mental flexibility

- These advantages are found in bilingual adults too!

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It doesn't matter which languages

- If the advantages of bilingualism are related to the switching from one language to the other, and blocking one language when the other one is spoken, it doesn't matter WHICH languages bilingual children learn.

- THERE ARE NO 'MORE USEFUL' OR 'LESS USEFUL LANGUAGES FROM THIS POINT OF VIEW!

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What's the best time?

- The best 'window of opportunity' for becoming fully bilingual is childhood.

- Children can acquire languages without any effort: it is a spontaneous process that takes place if the child is exposed to enough 'engaging' input.

- Children don't need to 'study the grammar' of a second language!

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How children acquire languages

Children learn languages best when….
- they are totally 'immersed' in the language
- they are engaged in meaningful interactions (talking, singing, playing) with people who care about them
- they listen to language that is modified in particular ways (shorter sentences, lots of repetitions, exaggerated intonation, etc.)

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How children acquire languages

- We use these principles in the EC project "Let's Become a Bilingual Family" (http://www.bilfam.eu)

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The earlier the better, but…

- Exposure to the two languages doesn't have to be from birth.
- Many studies have focused on 'successive bilingual' children.

The good news is that….

- child second language learners attain higher levels of competence in both languages and can also benefit from the cognitive advantages of bilingualism.

(Bak et al. 2010)

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Attitudes towards minority languages

- Children are very sensitive to people's attitudes towards language: they know whether a language is considered 'unimportant'.
- Children need to realise that
  - both languages and cultures are valued by the family and the community.
  - both languages can be used in all situations and are spoken by many people outside the family.

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The problem in the UK

- Countries that don't invest in language learning - like the UK - are missing out not only on LANGUAGE skills, but also on the MENTAL FLEXIBILITY that comes with bilingualism.
- This affects British students, researchers, civil servants, and businesses.

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The problem in the UK

THES, 21/11/2010:

"The most basic worry is that [the lack of foreign language skills] leaves the largely monoglot British people, at a time of economic crisis, without some of the skills essential for flourishing in a competitive global marketplace".

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The problem in the UK

FT.com, 20/1/2011

"Manuel Barroso, European Commission president, last week bemoaned the "shockingly low" number of Britons applying to work in Brussels, amid fears that they are being deterred by their lack of a foreign language…

Normally, candidates have to take the exam in a foreign tongue and also demonstrate working knowledge of a third European language. This requirement has proved too much for many Britons".

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The problem in the UK

- In the UK, children are introduced to other languages far too late.
- There are no incentives or motivation to learn languages.
- Children don't have confidence in their language learning abilities.

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What can be done?

- Parents need to have the correct information about the facts / benefits of bilingualism and early language exposure, so that they can make informed decisions and support language learning in their children.

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What's the aim of this project?

- We can arouse children's natural curiosity towards languages and tap their natural language learning abilities.
- We can show children that there are many languages and that they are easy – and fun - to learn.
- By 'priming' them to languages at an early age, we can make them more receptive and willing to learn languages later on.
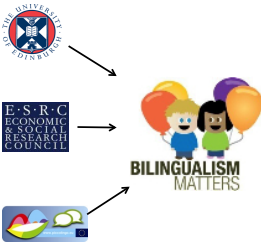
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Monolingualism: is it curable?

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS BILINGUALISM
NEED TO CHANGE**

INFORMATION IS CRUCIAL!

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A Scottish initiative: Bilingualism Matters

- Since Oct 2008:
  - 59 community talks
  - 47 seminars to international companies and organizations
  - 39 media articles and interviews
  - Partnerships in Scotland and UK

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Bilingualism Matters: what does it provide?

- A website containing:
  - FAQs (translated into 15 languages)
  - Local resources
  - Current events: talks, workshops, etc.
  - General audience references (books, articles and web-based resources)

- Email replies to requests for advice and information.
- Talks in the community
- Seminars and workshops for the private sector and for international companies and organisations.

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Bilingualism Matters: areas of engagement

- Language learning exposure in the preschool and primary school years

- Maintenance of home languages in immigrant children

- Maintenance of regional minority languages

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Bilingualism Matters branches

Flere språk til flere in Tromsø, Norway:

Bilingualism Matters in the Western Isles in Stornoway:

Me 2 Glosses in Thessaloniki, Greece:

Bilinguismo Conta will open in Italy soon

Role of Bilingualism Matters in the EICL project

- Bilingualism Matters is happy to be a partner and facilitator in the EICL project, providing training and information on the facts and benefits of early exposure to languages at all levels.

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Website and contacts

http://www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk/

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THANK YOU!

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