MULTILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: MYTHS, FACTS, AND CHALLENGES

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Overview

• What does it mean to be ‘bilingual’?

• Brief tour of misconceptions and research

• Some studies on language learning and bilingualism in schools
Misconceptions on bilingualism

Confusion

Developmental delays

Problems at school

‘Useful’ and ‘useless’ languages
Five-minute tour of research
What research shows

• Early perceptual separation of the two languages

• Similar stages and milestones in bilingual and monolingual language development
Bilingual children ‘notice’ how language works

WORDS

SOUNDS

SENTENCES
Competence and creativity in language mixing

Easier to learn other languages; potential better understanding of the structure of the majority language.
What research shows

- Good metalinguistic abilities

- Transfer of aspects of early literacy from one language to the other (when a sufficient vocabulary is learned)
What research shows

• Earlier and better awareness of other people’s perspectives

• Better control of attention and ability to handle conflicting information (executive functions)
“Now you see it, now you don’t” (but no studies report a DISadvantage of bilingualism).

Bilingualism comes in many shapes and colours.
Children need input in both languages

- Bilingual children need to **hear** enough of both languages.
Variety of speakers

Hearing the language from different speakers is important to learn what is possible and what is impossible in the language.
Social and family attitudes

- both languages and both cultures are valued by the family and the community.
Important to now that...

- Bilingual children have two vocabularies: all other things being equal, the size of vocabulary in each language is smaller than in monolinguals, especially in the first few years and in the weaker language.
Important to know that…

• Children who have a home language different from the community language may go through a ‘silent period’ in which they produce very little.

• Some types of SLI and child L2 learning may look similar, but their developmental paths over time are different.
Language learning at school

• Language Learning in Scotland: 1+2 plan
Language learning at school: realistic expectations

• One hour a week (or less): what can be achieved at different ages?

• Monolingual and bilingual children: do they learn differently?
Pilot studies

• We train volunteer students who are native speakers of Mandarin, Spanish and French to work with the teacher in P1 classes.

• We act as a point of reference for questions on child language learning during the project.

• We do research on the outcome of the project
• Testing stage 1: P1 children from monolingual homes.

• Testing stage 2: P3 children from bilingual and monolingual homes
Early Chinese Learning Project

• Testing at stage 1:
  – School A: 25 weekly sessions of 1hr 30 hours. Cumulative input = 37.5 hours; More native tutor-led activities.
  – School B: 26 weekly sessions of 45 minutes. Cumulative input = 19.5 hours
  – School C: 25 weekly sessions of about 1hr 45mins. Cumulative input = 43.75 hours; more teacher-led activities.
  – School Y: no input
Early Chinese Learning Project

• What were the outcomes of the learning experience?
  – How much Chinese have children learned?
  – Did exposure to Chinese have any effects on English?
  – Were there any effects of the learning experience outside language?
Early Chinese Learning Project

What we tested

- **Chinese language ability:**
  - Lexical tones
  - Some written Chinese characters.

- **Metalinguistic awareness:**
  - Better awareness in the mother tongue

- **Executive functions:**
  - Effects of Mandarin input on children’s attentional skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target sound</th>
<th>Sound in sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ma1</td>
<td>ma3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shi2</td>
<td>ir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hao3</td>
<td>hao3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Better performance is achieved by School A compared to the others:

(a) More hours of input, and
(b) More exposure to native speaker-led input.

Figure 3: Percentage of characters correctly recognised by pupils receiving high versus medium input.
Second study:

- Above-chance performance on Chinese recognition tests
- No difference in cognitive and English tests between children exposed to Chinese and children exposed to French.
Our recommendations:

• Introduce a streamlined syllabus for all schools which forms the core of language activities.

• Increase the amount of training and support available to teachers and volunteers

• Swap volunteers between participating schools or classes.
• Maintaining home languages in migrant children helps school achievement in general, and language learning in particular.
Many families force themselves to speak the L2 at home rather than their L1.

Research has shown that children exposed predominantly to impoverished non-native L2 input are at a disadvantage in acquiring the L2.
The SOFT project

- Funded by EACEA – Lifelong Learning
- Partners: Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Germany, UK (Scotland).
- Start date: 1 December 2012, end date: 30 November 2015.
The SOFT project

- Aim: fostering the linguistic and social integration of migrant children through shared language learning activities that involve children, teachers, and families.
The SOFT project

503 children:

Scottish: 227
Non-Scottish: 276

Countries of origin: Poland, Iraq, Syria, South Africa, Nigeria, Zambia, Slovakia, China, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Brazil

29 teachers
The SOFT project

Quantitative Data:

- Cognitive Test: DCCS
- Language tests in English and in the other language learned
- Questionnaire on home language use patterns

Qualitative Data:

- Classroom observations by teachers and tutors.
Question 1: Do children exposed to a language in a classroom setting develop better general cognitive abilities?

→ Yes: all children do, but immigrant children show a steeper development

Question 2: Do children who are already bilingual have an advantage at learning other languages?

→ Yes, they do.
Garraffa, Beveridge & Sorace (2015)

- 95 children attending primary 1 and 2 classes in central Sardinia:
  
  40 Italian-Sardinian bilingual children

  45 Italian monolingual children.
Regional minority languages: Sardinian

- Cognitive tests:
  - Opposite Worlds (verbal)
  - Dimensional Change Card Sorting task (non verbal)

- Linguistic tests:
  - Modified version of COMPRENDO, a comprehension test of Italian.
Regional minority languages: Sardinian

- **Cognitive tasks**: no differences for the younger children, but older children eventually overtake monolinguals.

- **Italian language task**: no differences between bilingual and monolingual children, except for two complex structures where bilinguals have an advantage on monolinguals.
Regional minority languages: Scottish Gaelic

Sorace, Cape & Bak (submitted):

- 63 bilingual children in GME, age 8-10; matched monolingual controls in English-medium education schools

- 3 tests from the ‘Test of Everyday Attention for Children”

- Bilingual children better than monolinguals in one of the tests, “Opposite Worlds”, just like the Italian-Sardinian children in the Sardinian study. No difference in the other tests.
Language learning in schools

MORE INFORMATION = BETTER DECISIONS
Bilingualism Matters

- University of Edinburgh Centre of Excellence
- Seminars and training for the community, international companies and institutions
- Public engagement and policy advice
- Regularly invited to comment by media (on language and multilingualism)
- Diversifed network in Europe (15 branches), growing in North America (2 branches)
Areas of engagement

• Early language learning in the preschool and primary school years

• Maintenance of home languages in immigrant children

• Maintenance of regional minority languages

• Language learning in young and older adults
Partnerships and collaborations
Projects

European Commission

National Science Foundation

Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

REGION AUTÔNOMA DE SARDIGNA
REGION AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

School and Family Together

for the Integration of Immigrant Children

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THANK YOU!