

One brain two languages many advantages

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Outline



- Bilingualism gives children a lot more than two languages.
- Implications for
 - early second language learning
 - home languages in immigrant families
 - local minority languages
- The importance of information in society:
Bilingualism Matters.



Is bilingualism “special”?

- Bilingualism is perfectly normal in many places of the world, but not (yet) in our society.
- More international mobility leads to more bilingual/multilingual families.

Scotland, for example, has become a multilingual country where at least 161 different languages are spoken.

- There is a growing need for information about how bilingualism works.



Lack of information and misconceptions



- Bilingualism is often surrounded by negative attitudes and misunderstandings.
- Doubts and insecurity are common even among people who have positive attitudes towards bilingualism.



Some common myths about bilingualism



“BILINGUALISM CAUSES DELAYS IN THE CHILD’S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT”

“BILINGUALISM LEADS TO LANGUAGE CONFUSION”

“BILINGUALISM IS USEFUL ONLY IF BOTH LANGUAGES ARE USEFUL (I.E. IF THEY ARE WIDELY SPOKEN)”

“BILINGUALISM IS ‘GENETIC’: IT HAPPENS SPONTANEOUSLY WHENEVER PARENTS ARE NATIVE SPEAKERS OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES”



How does the child's brain work?



- Children can acquire any language without any 'effort', just like learning to walk.
- Child bilingualism is different from adult second language learning: it happens spontaneously if the child has enough input, opportunity, motivation, and fun.
- The child's brain can deal with two (or even more) languages.



Bilingualism = a lot more than two languages





- **Social** advantages (generally well known):
 - access to two cultures
 - more tolerance towards/interest in other cultures
 - future advantages in the job market
- **Linguistic** advantages (less known):
 - ability to distinguish between *form* and *meaning*
 - enhanced language learning abilities
 - more precocious reading skills
- **Cognitive** advantages (generally unknown):
 - mental benefits: how children think and use their brain in many situations.



Spontaneous knowledge about language



- Bilingual children **‘notice’ how language works.**
- Having two different language systems makes the structure of language more salient and favours the child’s attention to its features.
- Because of their ‘implicit’ understanding of language, bilingual children find it easier to pick up other languages.

- For example, bilingual children have two words for the same object (e.g. *milo* and *apple* for ) and can distinguish between *forms* and *meanings*.
- They understand the conventional relationship between **objects** in the real world and their **labels**.
- They find it easier to learn relations among words, i.e. accept that the same object  can be both a DOG and an ANIMAL.



Sounds



- Bilingualism affects some key background components to literacy.
- Bilingual children tend to be **more precocious readers** especially if they learn two languages that are written alphabetically.
- Reading skills transfer across (similar) languages.

- Bilingual children find it easier to identify and recognize the sounds of the spoken language.
- Bilingual children acquiring alphabetic languages have an earlier understanding of the **correspondence between letters and sounds**.
- E.g. Which is the longest word?

TRAIN



CATERPILLAR





Early separation of the two languages



- Bilingual children can distinguish between their two languages from the very beginning of their lives.
- Bilingual children follow a similar sequence of stages and milestones in each of the two languages as monolingual children.

Studies with babies

- Very young bilingual babies can be shown to distinguish the sounds of the two languages they have been exposed to.
- They do this even when the two languages are very similar - e.g. Spanish and Catalan.

(Bosch & Sebastián Gallés 2003)





Language mixing



- Children generally don't mix their languages (but they can do so deliberately and for fun!)
- Language mixing – when it occurs - is usually **not a sign of linguistic confusion**:
 - adult bilinguals do it too
 - children mix when they speak with other bilinguals, not when they speak to monolinguals
 - mixing is not random: it has a “grammar”



Awareness of other points of view



- Bilingual children understand at an earlier age that other people may have a different perspective from their own.
- This advantage comes from children's constant experience of choosing a language on the basis of the person they talk to.



Example: adopting another person's perspective



- Test: *“A boy puts his chocolate in a cupboard and then leaves the room; during his absence his mother puts it in on top of the fridge. Where will the boy look for the chocolate when he returns to the room?”*
- Three-year-old bilingual children are more likely to give the correct answer (‘in the cupboard’) than their monolingual peers.



Attention



Bilinguals tend to be better than monolinguals at:

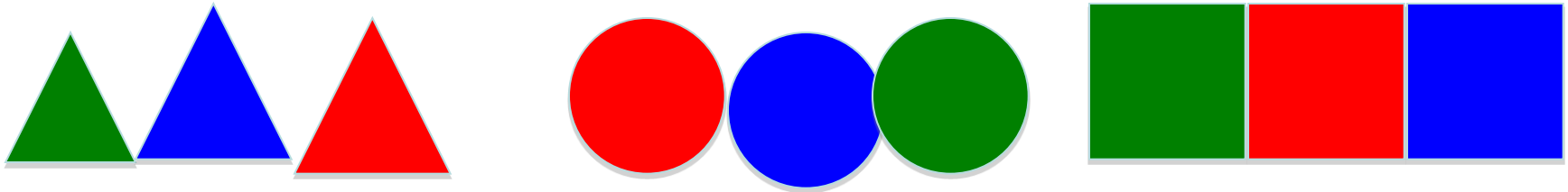
- **switching between tasks** that require attention to different instructions
- **focusing attention** on specific features while ignoring other distracting features

These differences persist throughout life: they are found both in bilingual children and in adults who were raised bilingual from early childhood.

An example

- Switching between tasks:

Task A: sorting objects by shape



Task B: sorting objects by colour:



- Bilingual children are less likely than monolinguals to persevere with Task A when they are asked to perform in Task B.



Why these advantages?



- The two languages of bilinguals are always active.
- Bilinguals have to 'filter out' one language when they speak the other.
- They have massive practice of using a control mechanism that allows them to limit interference between their languages.
- The same mechanism may be used in other activities that require controlled attention.



No effects on “intelligence”!



- Bilingual children are NOT “more intelligent” than monolingual children: they have an “extra gear” that can improve their performance in a wide range of situations.



Any pair of languages will do



- If the advantages of bilingualism are related to the switching from one language to the other, and inhibiting one language when the other one is spoken, they should happen regardless of WHICH languages bilingual children learn.



Are the benefits found only in children from privileged backgrounds?

The answer is no.

- Recent research on Spanish-English children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the US has shown that they perform better on control tasks than monolinguals.



Are the benefits found only in children from a particular culture?

The answer is no.

- Recent research on bilingual and monolingual children in Canada and India has shown that bilinguals in both these countries perform better on selective attention tasks than monolinguals.



Potential longer-term advantages



- Some new studies suggests that bilingualism may offer some protection against the deterioration of cognitive abilities in old age.



Raising a child bilingual: What's the best time?



- Many parents in bilingual households think that it is better to wait to introduce one of the languages until the other one is 'well established'.
- **This, however, deprives the child of language input in the most crucial years.**
- It is more difficult to introduce the other language later on and for the parents to use a 'new' language around the house.



The earlier the better



- The best ‘window of opportunity’ for becoming fully bilingual is early childhood.
- But the good news is that....



Child second language learners



-exposure to another language in the primary school years is more likely to lead to bilingualism than in late adolescent/adult years.
- Many studies (including our own research) have found that **child second language learners also benefit from the linguistic and cognitive advantages of bilingualism.**



Being committed to bilingualism: planning, opportunities, motivation



- Being native speakers of different languages is not sufficient to make bilingualism work.
- Children need to **hear enough of both languages.**
- This takes some commitment and consistency.



How children perceive the minority language is important



- 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 are valued by the family and the community.
 - both languages are spoken by many people outside the family and can be used in all situations.



Why information is important



- If families, teachers, health professionals and policy makers have the correct information about the advantages of bilingualism, more and more children to grow up with two languages.



Awareness of the benefits of bilingualism can help to...



- exploit (or create) opportunities to raise children bilingual from early childhood.
- invest more resources in language learning both in the pre-school and in the primary school years.
- recognize that languages spoken by children of immigrant families are a rich resource and not an obstacle.
- maintain minority languages through child bilingualism.



A recent initiative: Bilingualism Matters



- Partly funded by the Knowledge Transfer Office of the University of Edinburgh.
- Initially awarded funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council.
- Now linked to the European Commission's campaign "Piccolingo", aimed to raise awareness of the importance of early second language learning.





Bilingualism Matters: what does this service provide?



- A **website** containing:
 - FAQs (now in 12 languages)
 - Local resources
 - Current events: talks, workshops, etc.
 - General audience references (books, articles and web-based resources)
- **Free talks** in the community; **information workshops** for institutions, businesses, and other organizations.
- **Email replies** to requests for advice and information.



Bilingualism Matters: progress



- Bilingualism Matters is rapidly expanding outside Scotland and the UK.
- It is reaching more and more parents and teachers at all levels, health professionals, policy makers.
- This success shows that there is wide scope for similar initiatives that bridge the gap between research on bilingualism and society.



Contacts



We welcome feedback and suggestions!

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THANK YOU!