We need to separate...

We need to separate...

...from science fiction

MYTHS

FACTS

We need to separate....

Myths about child language learning

Confusion

Problems at school

‘Useful’ and ‘not useful’ languages

What research shows

• Better understanding of how language works; headstart in early literacy
• Better ability to learn other languages and (potentially) better at the majority language
• Language mixing = competence in both languages

What research shows

• Better awareness of other people’s perspectives
• Better selective attention and ability to handle conflicting information
• Better flexibility in task switching
We have found selective cognitive effects of language learning in university students... and in much older adult learners.

What matters is the fact of having more than one language in the brain.

There are no ‘useful’ or ‘useless’ languages from this point of view!

These benefits are not always found in all bilinguals and language learners: many other factors play a role.

Is this the way it works?

Important implications for...
- Families
- Migrant children and multilingual classrooms
- Regional minority languages
- Language learning and teaching in primary schools
Language learning at school
Younger not necessarily better unless children get...
- Enough input in the second language
- Engagement
- Variety of speakers

Language learning in Scottish schools
- Children learn differently at different ages
- One hour a week: enough input?
- Teachers should be trained on language learning
- Parents should be informed and helped to support their child

Difficult languages?
- All languages are learnable by young children.
- But children don’t learn like adults: they rely on different cognitive mechanisms as they develop.
- Realistic expectations about learning outcomes

How do children learn languages?
- Young children don’t need ‘formal language lessons’
- Their explicit learning abilities are limited and their cognitive control is still developing: they are much better at learning implicitly.
- Engagement is crucial!

What about older children?
Higher cognitive maturity:
- Better explicit learning abilities
- More developed attentional skills and cognitive control

Let’s look at some research
The SOFT project

- Funded by EACEA – Lifelong Learning
- Partners: Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Germany, UK (Scotland).

Aim: fostering the linguistic and social integration of immigrant children through shared language learning activities.

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

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Question 1: Do children exposed to a language in a classroom setting develop better general cognitive abilities?

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

Question 3: Do monolingual children benefit from exposure to a multilingual environment?

62 children aged 5-6: 36 English monolingual and 26 unbalanced bilinguals learning English as an L2.

Homogeneous groups: a ratio of 95% of L1 English monolinguals.

Heterogeneous groups: children both from Scottish monolingual homes and from migrant monolingual as well as multilingual families (roughly 50% mono- and multilingual children).

English was the main language in the classroom; all the children were engaged in second-language activities in Spanish with the Narrative Format Methodology.

Quantitative Data (collected at two stages of the programme):
- Cognitive Test: DCCS
- Language tests in English and in Spanish
- Questionnaire on home language use patterns

Qualitative Data:
- Classroom observations by teachers and tutors.
The SOFT project: results

- A greater number of multilinguals passed the DCCS test than monolinguals, despite low levels of English language proficiency and limited or non-existing language-switching opportunities.
- Emerging trend where monolinguals in heterogeneous groups performed better than their homogeneous counterparts.

Pilot studies in Scottish classrooms

- We train volunteer students who are native speakers of Mandarin, Spanish and French to work with the teacher in primary school classes.
- We do research on the outcome of the project.

Early Chinese Learning Project

First study: P1 classes in different East Lothian schools:

- 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

- Chinese language ability:
  - Lexical tones
  - Some written Chinese characters.
- Metalinguistic awareness:
  - Better awareness in the mother tongue
- Attentional control:
  - Effects of Mandarin input on children’s attentional skills

Early Chinese Learning Project

- Learning and better test performance achieved only in schools offering:
  (a) More hours of input, and
  (b) More exposure to native speaker-led input.

Early Chinese Learning Project

Second study (P3 classes):

- Above-chance performance on Chinese recognition tests
- No difference in cognitive and English tests between children exposed to Chinese and children exposed to French.
Language policy and intervention are often disconnected from the communities of learners and teachers, and from research.

What can be done?

- Providing accessible and accurate information to parents, teachers and policy makers about benefits, challenges and developmental facts = better decisions

- Making languages 'real' and engaging for children inside and outside the classroom

- Evaluate outcomes in schools and obtain evidence of what is or isn't working through research

Bilingualism Matters

- University of Edinburgh Centre of Excellence
- Seminars and training for international companies and institutions
- Public engagement and policy advice
- Regular appearance in the media (on language and multilingualism)
- International network in Europe (16 branches), in the US (3 branches) and in the Middle East (1 branch)
THANK YOU!

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