

Bilingualism is good for learning



Cambridge University researchers are spreading the message that bilingualism is good for learning, rather than a hindrance as sometimes perceived.

Research shows that children who speak more than one language are multiply advantaged over their monolingual playmates – in communication, cognition and social interaction. Yet, a perception among some parents and teachers is that growing up multilingual is not only fraught with challenges but may even be a risk to educational development, say researchers Drs Dora Alexopoulou, Napoleon Katsos and Teresa Parodi of the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics.

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Dora Alexopoulou

Aiming to dispel such misconceptions and champion the benefits of bilingualism, the three linguists have launched an outreach initiative, the ‘Cambridge Bilingualism Network’, aimed at parents, teachers and policy-makers, and will be hosting a workshop on 22 October at the University of Cambridge Festival of Ideas (www.cam.ac.uk/festivalofideas/).

“There’s a huge body of research on bilingualism, much of which is quite technical,” explained Dr Katsos. “We hope to raise awareness of the benefits of bilingualism among stakeholder groups by creating access to this state-of-the-art research and by facilitating contact between the community and our network of specialists at the University.”

One aspect of such research shows that bilingual children ‘notice’ better how language works and outperform monolingual children in tasks linked to language awareness, such as distinguishing whether a sentence is grammatically well-formed from whether it is truthful.

But the benefits go even further, as Dr Alexopoulou explained: “Studies show that a bilingual child is better able to cope with tasks that involve attention, memory and concentration. The mental gymnastics needed to constantly manage two or more linguistic systems increases cognitive flexibility and makes learning easier.”

The advantages of bilingualism hold independently of whether the language in question is spoken by many speakers or is what is commonly viewed as being a ‘useful’ language, observes Dr Parodi. “It’s important to

balance this perception of ‘usefulness of a language’ by increasing awareness of the advantages of bilingualism, or the child risks losing their additional language.”

“Moreover, lack of awareness about bilingualism may lead to schools incorrectly diagnosing, or failing to diagnose actual learning difficulties if a phase of linguistic difficulty is observed”, she added. “Typically, if the problem shows in both languages this will point to a learning difficulty, but not if it only shows in one of them.”

Recent research carried out by Dr Katsos is aimed towards identifying a method to distinguish between a child showing a typical delay and a child with an underlying learning problem.

In collaboration with colleagues in Poland and with funding from the British Academy, he discovered that bilingual children are very good at understanding concepts that hold for all languages, such as the meaning of *some*, *most* and *all*, but may take longer to master those parts of grammar that are specific for one language and not the other one.

“A child with temporary delay may score well in the former but less so in the latter test, whereas a child with learning difficulties is likely to score low in both,” he explained. With the help of a Social Entrepreneurship Catalyst Award from HEFCE and UnLimited, Dr Katsos is now turning the research into an off-the-shelf language assessment tool.

Research in the field has also shown that raising and educating children to be bilingual doesn’t happen simply because two different languages are spoken at home, but instead requires continued input on the part of parents. The commitment of teachers and parents is therefore vital.

Through conversations with teachers and parents, the team is also pinpointing where further study is needed, and this is being fed back into the academics’ own research. In particular, the linguists have realised that comparatively few studies have focused on those children who move to a different country and begin learning a second language at primary school age.

The researchers are now extending their outreach activities to a greater number of schools in collaboration with Cambridgeshire County Council’s Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity Service (CREDS) and in partnership with several schools.

Arbury Primary School in Cambridge is one the Network’s recent partners. Kathy Whiting, a teacher at Arbury and County leading Teacher for English as an Additional Language said: “The Cambridge Bilingualism Network events are inspiring and thought-provoking. Parents and teachers appreciate the scientific exposition of the benefits of bilingualism. They also welcome the opportunity to air the, often implicit, concerns and aspirations. We are delighted that this partnership between the University and our school has lead parents and teachers to higher levels of awareness and engagement with bilingualism.”

“Although bilingualism is perfectly normal in many places in the world, it is comparatively new in the English-speaking world,” added Dr Alexopoulou. “The problem with an education system set up with assumptions of monolingualism is there is a risk that children may miss out on the significant benefits conferred by maintaining their bilingualism.”

The ‘Cambridge Bilingualism Network’ involves researchers from several departments of the University who specialise on different aspects of learning more than one language. For instance, Professor Usha Goswami at the Department of Experimental Psychology focuses on reading and the brain, and Drs Edith Esch and Linda Fisher in the Faculty of Education focus on bilingualism in the family and the classroom. As such, the ‘Cambridge Bilingualism Network’ extends a warm invitation to all Cambridge researchers working on language who wish to contribute towards breaking the barriers between academia and social practice.