ENGAGING NON-ACADEMIC AUDIENCES IN BILINGUALISM RESEARCH: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Bilingualism needs bridges, both in science and in real life…
From research to the community, and back again
Ten-minute tour of research
Myths about child bilingualism

CONFUSION AND DELAYS

BAD RESULTS AT SCHOOL

BENEFITS IN SOME LANGUAGES BUT NOT IN OTHERS
What research shows instead

- Early separation of the two languages

- Spontaneous understanding of how language works † better language learning skills

- Competence and creativity in language mixing
What research shows instead

- Earlier awareness of other people’s perspectives
- Better control of attention and ability to handle conflicting information
Myths about adult bilingualism

• **INABILITY TO LEARN WELL**

• **RULES AND CORRECTION AS ONLY WAY TO LEARN**

• **L1 EFFECTS ON THE L2 BUT NO L2 EFFECT ON THE L1**
What research shows instead

- Native-like levels of L2 proficiency
- Most of L2 knowledge is implicit
- L1 change necessary for L2 success
- Brain plasticity even in old age
- Cognitive reserve in ageing
New myths emerging

- BILINGUAL CHILDREN ARE GENIUSES!

- IF YOU ARE BILINGUAL YOU DON’T GET ALZHEIMER’S!

- OR EVEN WORSE....
Bilingualism = automatic benefits?

• Current controversy: “Now you see it, now you don’t”

• Bilingualism comes in many shapes and colours

• Many other factors may play a role: WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE!
Many effects of bilingualism are related to the child’s ability to separate their two languages - in perception first and in production later.

Sufficient exposure to both languages is needed.
• Exposure to normal variation
Societal effects on bilingual cognition

- Patterns of language use in the family and in society

- Attitudes towards the language
MORE INFORMATION = BETTER DECISIONS
Bilingualism Matters

- University of Edinburgh Centre of Excellence
- Seminars and training for international companies and institutions
- Public engagement and policy advice
- Regularly invited to comment by media (on language and multilingualism)
- International network in Europe (15 branches), growing in North America (2 branches) and in Asia (likely HK branch)
Recent changes:

- Madeleine Beveridge moved to another job last May
- We have just hired two new people: a Centre Administrator and a Research Coordinator
- New team in place by end of September
From research to the community
Areas of engagement

• Language learning over the lifespan
• Bilingualism in migrant families
• Bilingualism in regional minority languages
• Bilingualism and health
Half of our work

- BILINGUALISM DOES NOT DAMAGE CHILDREN
- LANGUAGE LEARNING IS NOT A WASTE OF TIME AND MONEY
The other half of our work

• BILINGUALISM MAY ACTUALLY BE VERY GOOD FOR BOTH CHILDREN AND ADULTS
Language learning: our work in Scotland
Language learning in Scotland

• Language learning in Scotland: The 1+2 plan

• Introduced in 2014, fully operational by 2020
Language learning at school: realistic expectations

• One or two hours a week: what can be achieved?

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

• 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 (depending on resources)
Early Learning of Chinese Project

• Testing stage 1: 43 children from monolingual homes.

• Testing stage 2 (ongoing): children from bilingual and monolingual homes
EU-funded project in Scottish homes and schools

- Funded by EACEA – Lifelong Learning
• Bilingualism is essential for the transmission of a minority language across generations.

• Speaking the minority language may give children the benefits of bilingualism.
Gaelic

- Branches (Western Isles 2012-14); now negotiating with the Gaelic Board

- Research projects
Sardinian
Sign language
Preserving and documenting language diversity
Health

- Atypical bilingualism
  - SLI
  - Autism

- Ageing
  - Language learning in older people
  - Dementia
The private sector
The UK has the worst language skills of all 28 countries in the EU.

Lack of language skills costs the UK economy £48 billion.

Not only to improve communication, trade with a greater number of international partners and understand cultural differences…

… but also because languages can bring specific cognitive advantages for business skills.
Multilingualism: business impact

- rational decision making

- prioritising

- ‘soft power’ in negotiating

- seeing things from the perspective of other people
From the community to research
Many families invite us to do research with their children.

Research in our infants lab is advertised through BM.

Outreach is becoming a part of the lab activities.
Students and visitors (both undergraduate and graduate) volunteer to assist with particular BM activities or projects.

This experience is increasingly valued by employers.
More and more researchers in the field of bilingualism have been joining the BM network.
European branches of Bilingualism Matters

Flere språk til flere Tromsø, Norway:

(Bilingualism Matters in the Western Isles Hebrides, Scotland TO BE RENEWED)

Me 2 Glosses Thessaloniki, Greece:

Bilinguismo Conta Trento, Italy:

(Bilinguismu Creschet Sardinia, Italy (TO BE RENEWED)

Bilinguismo Conta-Nuovi Cittadini Siena, Italy:

Bilingualism Matters @ Reading Reading, England:
Bilingualism Matters Konstanz, Germany

Bilingualism Matters @ Rijeka Croatia:

Bilingualism Matters @ NLs Amsterdam, NL:

Bilingualism Matters @ Slovenia Nova Gorica

Bilingualism Matters @ Milan Milan, Italy:

Bilingualism Matters @ Nantes, Francia

Bilingualism Matters @ Basque Country Vitoria, UPV/EHU
US branches of *Bilingualism Matters*

*Bilingualism Matters @ Penn State*, USA

*Bilingualism Matters @ Rutgers*, USA
*(RUBilingual)*
To open in November: Trondheim

Under negotiation: Hong Kong, Granada, Berlin

Expressions of interest received from Krakow, Naples, Puerto Rico
Challenges

• Wide remit and limited resources

• Fundraising

• International network: strategies for linking research and public engagement among partners
THANK YOU!

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