



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
School of Philosophy, Psychology  
& Language Sciences



Information for teachers about bilingual children

# Breaking down the language barrier

We sometimes think of bilingualism as the exception, but it is more common than you might think. In Scotland, over 42,000 school children speak a language other than English at home – a total of 142 different languages.

There are many ways of being bilingual:

- Some children don't use English at home
- Some children use different languages with different family members
- Some children can understand a language but not speak or write it

**... But all children are sensitive to attitudes about their languages.**

Bilingualism is a fantastic opportunity to help a child:

- Maintain a link with their family, culture and heritage
- Develop stronger skills in reading, language learning, attention and thinking

To reap these benefits, children need to feel that both their languages are valued.

## Is it true that bilingual children have an advantage?

Lots of factors affect children's achievement, such as motivation and social circumstances. Neither of these is directly linked to being bilingual. However, research does suggest that speaking multiple languages helps children perform better in some areas, especially tasks that involve ignoring irrelevant information. On the other hand, bilingual children sometimes start talking slightly later than their monolingual peers – the good news is that they soon catch up.

## Won't it confuse young children if we learn another language in class?

Research shows that children don't confuse their languages, no matter how early they start learning. Once children know a second language, it's easier to learn a third, or even fourth. Scientific studies also show that learning another language helps children understand that different people have different points of view. So learning a language together in class also helps to develop children's social skills.

# A child in my class doesn't speak English. What should I do?

Chances are that the child does not speak much English at home – and that's fine. Once children start hearing English in school, they will soon pick up the language. However, additional support for such learners can be useful; ask your school about accessing help and resources from your local *English as an Additional Language* provider.

## About us

Bilingualism Matters is a Centre for Public Engagement at the University of Edinburgh. It was set up in 2008 and now has branches all over Europe. We aim to raise awareness of bilingualism in families, schools and the public sector.

What Bilingualism Matters can do for educators:

- Offer training on bilingualism and language learning
- Talk to parents or children to explain the benefits of bilingualism
- Support projects introducing language learning in the classroom
- Provide further information and resources via our website and e-newsletter

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**For more information about bilingualism in general and our work with local government and schools, visit our website:**

**[www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk)**

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