

Multilingual/Bilingual Practise In the Early Years

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Multilingual practise in the early years

Introduction

Multilingualism refers to the use of three or more languages, while bilingualism involves the use of two languages. Both are considered important social practices. Definitions of multilingualism vary, ranging from the presence of multiple languages in a community to the ability of individuals to speak several languages. Multilingualism is an important global issue, and studying it involves different fields like linguistics, neuroscience, and sociology. Researchers look at how languages are used and how the brain processes them (Aronin, 2018).

This essay will explore the various benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, with a particular focus on English as an Additional Language (EAL). It will examine how learning multiple languages contributes to brain development, enhances divergent thinking, and improves cognitive flexibility. Additionally, the essay will discuss the frameworks and programs designed to support the growth and use of the Welsh language in Wales. Through this discussion, the essay aims to demonstrate the significant advantages of bilingualism in both cognitive and societal contexts.

Benefits of Bilingualism/ Multilingualism

Learning multiple languages fluently and using them regularly offers several advantages for children. These include enhanced language skills in both their first and second languages, better communication with a wider range of people, and increased vocational and economic opportunities. Additionally, bilingualism has been shown to positively impact various cognitive abilities, such as learning, memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, benefiting both children and adults (Booton *et al*, 2021).

Bilingualism offers several cognitive benefits, particularly in tasks that involve switching between activities. Research has shown that bilingual adults and children tend to perform better than monolinguals in these areas (Byers-Heinlein, Lew-Williams 2013).

This could be due to a bilingual person's experience in code-mixing languages and this skill is then transferred to other areas of learning.

Children living in a country different from their place of origin gain significant benefits from using their home language to maintain a connection to their heritage. This practice nurtures a sense of pride and reinforces their cultural identity. For families who have fled their home countries due to unsafe conditions, continuing to use their native language becomes especially important as it helps preserve their sense of identity and cultural continuity.

English as an additional language (EAL)

Children learning English as an additional language benefit from hearing it spoken by adults in a variety of meaningful contexts. When the context is relevant to the child, they are more likely to learn spoken English effectively. Adults play a key role in modeling correct English usage, observing the child's vocabulary, and building upon what the child already knows. As children progress, they may begin speaking English, along with any other languages they are learning, in different ways. Some children may eagerly imitate what they hear, initially using single words or short phrases (DOE, 2021).

This information can be supported by Bruner's theory. Bruner highlights the essential role of language in cognitive development, asserting that the two are closely interconnected, with each supporting the other. Bruner introduced the concept of the "Language Acquisition Support System" (LASS), which underscores the importance of adult-child interactions in language learning. A key aspect of Bruner's theory is scaffolding, a process where adults provide support to learners and gradually reduce it as the learners develop greater competence. This approach helps facilitate both language and cognitive growth (Early Years TV, 2025).

Code mixing, which involves combining words from two languages within the same sentence, is often misunderstood as a sign of confusion in bilingual children. However, it is actually a typical and natural aspect of bilingual development. Children may engage in code mixing because it is common in their surrounding language environment, with children often mimicking the language behaviors of adults. Additionally, bilingual

children, like monolingual ones, sometimes lack the vocabulary to express themselves fully in one language and may borrow words from the other. Rather than indicating confusion, code mixing demonstrates the flexibility and creativity of bilingual children. Studies also show that even young children can adjust their language use depending on their conversation partner, and early instances of code mixing often follow grammatical patterns similar to those seen in adult speakers (Byers-Heinlein.,Lew-Williams 2013).

Brain Development

Being bilingual offers key advantages, including enhanced memory and the ability to multitask. Studies show that bilingual individuals typically have better working memory compared to monolinguals. This is because juggling two languages forces the brain to store and retrieve information more effectively, thereby improving overall memory capacity (St Augustine College, 2024).

A 2020 study of Alzheimer's patients found that bilingual individuals could delay dementia symptoms by about four years compared to monolinguals. The research suggests that speaking two languages regularly builds a "cognitive reserve" that protects against Alzheimer's. Bilinguals constantly switch between languages, engaging the brain's frontal regions responsible for executive functions such as memory and self-control. This frequent mental exercise strengthens neural connections, potentially boosting resilience to Alzheimer's-related decline (UCLA Health, 2020).

This information is supported by the research of Calabria *et al.* (2018) Research found that bilinguals and multilinguals have differences in the amount of gray matter in their brains. Specifically, bilingual individuals tend to have more gray matter in several brain regions. This increased gray matter is associated with improved cognitive functions such as inhibition, conflict resolution, working memory, and task-specific processing. The study suggests that being bilingual can positively impact these cognitive abilities, potentially enhancing brain function.

Divergent thinking

A study conducted by Booton *et al* (2021) found no evidence that being bilingual improves divergent thinking skills. The study looked at both verbal and visual creativity and considered factors like age, intelligence, vocabulary, and exposure to English. The results showed no significant differences between monolingual and bilingual children, and the effect sizes were very small. This suggests that bilingualism doesn't offer an advantage in divergent thinking, which is an important part of creativity.

In comparison, Storme *et al* (2017) conducted a study which demonstrated that Bilingualism can be beneficial in divergent thinking, particularly in tasks that require creativity, as it enhances cognitive flexibility. Research suggests that bilinguals who frequently switch between languages in their daily lives may have an advantage in generating original ideas. In studies that involve divergent thinking tasks, such as generating multiple uses for everyday objects, bilinguals who are accustomed to frequent language switching tend to produce more original ideas compared to those who do not regularly switch languages. Therefore, bilingualism, especially with language switching, can encourage creative thinking by allowing individuals to approach problems from different cognitive angles.

Montessori's theory encourages divergent thinking by fostering creativity through self-directed learning and hands-on activities. It allows children to explore at their own pace, solve problems independently, and think critically, promoting flexibility and the generation of multiple ideas (Montessor, 2024).

Frameworks and programmes

On Census Day, 21 March 2021, around 538,300 residents in Wales aged three and above reported being able to speak Welsh, making up 17.8% of the population. This marks a decrease of approximately 23,700 people since the 2011 Census, reflecting a 1.2 percentage point drop (WAG, 2021)

There are many policies and frameworks put in place to increase the use of the Welsh language. The "Cymraeg: A Million Speakers by 2050" initiative, launched by the Welsh Government, aims to increase the number of Welsh speakers to one million by 2050.

The plan focuses on improving language learning opportunities, promoting Welsh in communities, and integrating it into sectors like education, media, and employment to ensure the language's future growth and sustainability (Cymraeg, 2017).

The BookTrust's dual-language (DL) books initiative is designed to support families with English as an additional language (EAL), ensuring they can engage with books and share the Bookstart messages in both their home language and English. Research shows that children with EAL benefit from enhanced thinking and reasoning skills due to the flexibility required to understand multiple languages. By offering DL books, the program helps build confidence in parents and carers who may not feel comfortable reading solely in English, while also guiding them to additional resources, such as local libraries. This approach fosters a love for reading and strengthens language development in both languages (BookTrust, 2019). In the supporting video, a DL book is read, using the Welsh and English language, this is done to include both English and Welsh speakers in the activity, and so Welsh learners can make connections through the repetitive use of sounds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, bilingualism offers numerous cognitive, social, and cultural benefits, particularly for children (Booton *et al*, 2021). It enhances language proficiency in both their native and second languages, promotes better communication, and opens greater vocational opportunities. Bilingual individuals also develop improved cognitive abilities, such as memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, which can benefit both children and adults.

The ability to switch between languages has been linked to enhanced creativity and divergent thinking, as it fosters cognitive flexibility (Storme *et al*, 2017). Furthermore, bilingualism supports cultural identity, especially for children who maintain their heritage language while living abroad. Despite mixed findings on the impact of bilingualism on divergent thinking, evidence suggests that frequent language switching can enhance creative problem-solving. Overall, bilingualism supports both cognitive development and

personal growth, with lasting benefits throughout life.

The Welsh Government are working to increase the number of Welsh speakers within Wales and aim to have a million Welsh speakers by 2050, the frameworks supporting this are used in schools, nurseries and there are many programs for adult Welsh speakers to improve their Welsh.

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AI Statement

I can confirm that no AI was used to complete this assignment