

SOME COMMON FALLACIES ABOUT MULTILINGUALISM AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

There are a number of **myths** and **misconceptions** which negatively influence attitudes and decision making about languages. This brochure examines some of the most common fallacies and seeks to refute these, drawing upon some of the findings from both general linguistic research and those arising from our research project.

Fallacy 1—People have a limited capacity in language, and time spent on one language is time taken away from another.

This is untrue because **knowing one language helps you understand another**. That is, through learning a second or third language you gain insights and understandings about how languages function, including knowledge about:

- the structure of words;
- the structure of sentences;
- the sound patterns possible in a language;
- how the structural features of a spoken language can be manipulated.

These skills are transferable and enhanced by acquiring more languages.

Fallacy 2—The curriculum is too crowded to allow time for a second language.

This is a statement about priorities. An education system has to decide what is an important part of

the curriculum and what can be done outside it. All over the world, a second language—and in some countries even a third—is part of the normal curriculum of all children. This is not only because of the value of these languages for communication with other peoples but particularly because of their value in developing children's potential to the fullest; **language learning helps develop our thinking processes**.

It helps us:

- make discoveries about the relationships between words and meaning;
- understand how language (including the first language) works;
- understand that different cultures have different ways of looking at the world.

Languages have been declared a *Key Learning Area*. However, by making them electives or by failing to afford a language program sufficient time to enable it to succeed, we are denying our children the opportunity to develop inter-cultural and thinking skills that their peers in most other countries have.

Fallacy 3—Other languages detract from children's ability to acquire literacy.

This assumes firstly that literacy is dependent on a specific language, and secondly that literacy can be acquired only in English.

Obviously there are many people in the world who become literate through a language other than English! There is substantial evidence that

literacy can be acquired in one or more languages and can be transferred into other languages—just as the skills of walking and driving can be transferred regardless of surface or vehicle. The acquisition of literacy requires the understandings of language mentioned under Fallacy 1 above. Some languages are more phonemic, that is, the written symbols correspond rather precisely to the sounds. English is not one of these, and people starting to read in Indonesian, Spanish, Hungarian or Croatian, for instance, will find it easier than if they started in English. Learning a completely different writing system such as Chinese or Japanese will take more time and may introduce additional principles, but the basic ones are the same. Other scripts such as Cyrillic, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi and Khmer operate on similar principles to the Roman script. There are Australian studies which indicate steady biliterate development on the part of Khmer-English and Farsi-English bilinguals.

Fallacy 4—A third language is too hard for a student to learn if they are already bilingual.

On the contrary, **knowing two languages generally helps you learn a third**—even if the languages are not closely related—because of your better understanding of how language works. (See pamphlet on **MORE LANGUAGES, MORE BENEFITS**.) Also, learning a third language often turns your interest in two languages into a more general interest in

languages. It also often stimulates the motivation to maintain and develop a home language.

Fallacy 5—‘Real Australian students’ cannot learn a second language and they are better off not continuing a language into upper secondary classes because they face unfair competition from students who hear or speak the language at home and do not really have to learn it.

There are a number of points that need to be addressed here:

In a multicultural society such as ours, **there are no ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ Australians.**

Problems with second language acquisition need to be addressed as attitudinal and organizational ones (including the shortage of adequate teachers for some languages). **The entire nation is greatly advantaged by the vast range of languages which are alive in our country.** As has been discussed in the pamphlet, **CATERING FOR DIVERSITY**, the presence in our wider community of significant numbers of speakers of other languages should be regarded as a resource for all language students. Teachers and students can take advantage of community resources in the language they are studying. Many students who do well in a community language which is not used at their home have friends who speak the language at home—this gives them more access to the language and the culture.

Families and communities using a language other than English are constantly in the process of

experiencing a shift to English. The degree of shift varies from one language group to another. But those students with a background in a community language will usually only maintain it through effort on their part and that of their families, and they will require instruction in that language just as students from monolingual English-speaking homes need to take English at school in order to enhance their capacity and pass examinations in the language. This is not an ‘unfair’ advantage.

For further information, please contact:

Research Unit for Multilingual
and Cross-Cultural Communication
School of Languages
University of Melbourne VIC 3010
Tel: (03) 8344 8950
Email: rumaccc-info@unimelb.edu.au

www.rumaccc.unimelb.edu.au

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