

Submission from Professor Antonella Sorace, University of Edinburgh

These comments are intended to address some issues related to the Scottish Government's 1+2 proposal. They are based on my academic expertise in the fields of bilingualism and language development, and on my public engagement experience as Director of the information service *Bilingualism Matters*.

Research shows that children can learn languages better when they are young. Young children don't need language lessons: they learn best in a spontaneous way, when they hear the language spoken in natural and engaging situations, ideally by different speakers.

There is no evidence that learning another language may compromise knowledge of the native language: in fact, research on bilingualism shows that learning another language benefits the first language in terms of vocabulary, understanding of how language works, and reading abilities. Learning another language at a young age also improves the ability to learn other languages later on.

Continuity of exposure to the same language is an advantage for learning that particular language: children need to hear enough input in a language over time in order to acquire fluency in it. However, even shorter exposure to another language, or a range of languages, is beneficial in terms of the child's awareness of the existence of other languages and the fact that language learning can be enjoyable. The latter point is particularly important in Scotland (and in the rest of the UK), because of the worldwide status of English and the consequent lack of motivation and incentives to learn other languages.

Children's learning abilities develop over time. Young children are better at learning the spoken language implicitly, without paying attention to grammar and form. Older children become increasingly able to learn 'about' language in an explicit way and can therefore benefit from more formal methods. All children, however, learn best when they hear the language in enjoyable activities that motivate them to use it.

Growing up with more than one language is advantageous for the brain: it improves mental flexibility, focused attention, and awareness of other people's perspectives. These benefits are not due to particular languages, but by having any two languages in the same brain. All languages are therefore worth learning, regardless of how widely they are spoken and whether they have social prestige. Regional minority languages, like Gaelic in Scotland, provide the opportunity for children to grow up bilingual. Bilingualism is vital for these languages in the realities of today's world, and bilingualism can be maintained only if the languages are learned by children.

There are no 'difficult' languages for young children, especially in the pre-school years when there is exposure only to the spoken language. Languages like Chinese are harder to learn at an adult age, but can be learned by European children as easily as European languages.

The availability of correct information in society ensures that communities are aware of the benefits of early language learning. The better families and teachers are

informed, the better they will respond to and engage with the Government's proposal. It is essential that efforts to implement the proposal are accompanied by a wide-ranging and realistic information campaign focused on the facts and advantages of early language learning.