

## Myth 5

*Students who only speak English 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.*

Families and communities speaking a language other than English are constantly in the process of shifting 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 their families. 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. Therefore there is no 'unfair' advantage.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

**Research Unit for Multilingualism and Cross-Cultural Communication**

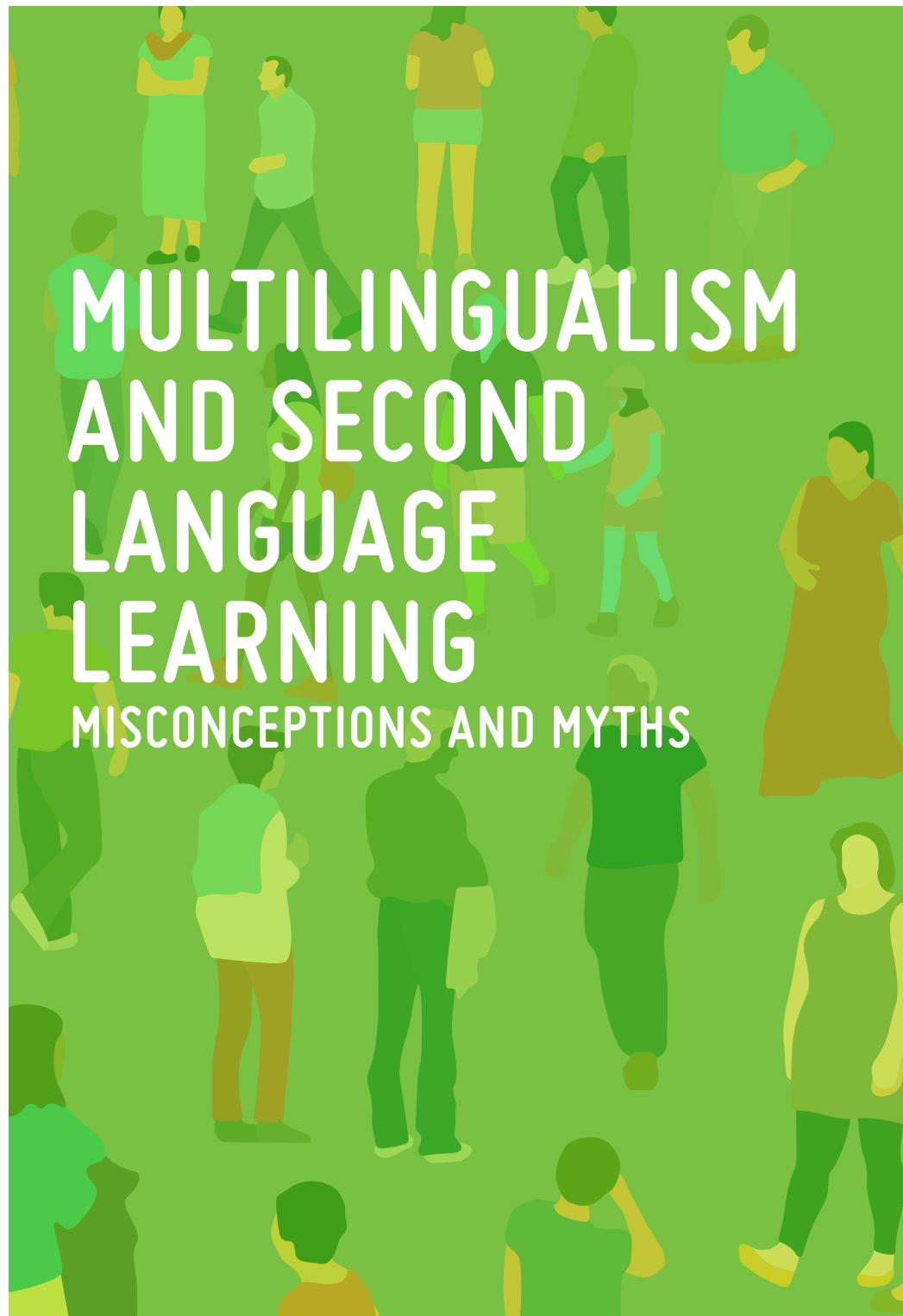
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# MULTILINGUALISM AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING MISCONCEPTIONS AND MYTHS



Several misconceptions and myths negatively influence attitudes and decision-making about languages. This brochure examines some of the most common myths, refuting them by drawing upon findings in linguistic research.

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### Myth 1

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

This is wrong. Knowing one language helps people understand another language. Learning a second or third language provides insight and understanding about how languages function. This includes knowledge about:

- the structure of words and 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.

### Myth 2

***The curriculum is too crowded to allow time for a second language.***

This is a statement about priorities. An education system decides what is important enough to be included and what needs to be learnt outside of school. All over the world, a second language – and in some countries even a third – is part of the normal curriculum for all children. This is not only because of the value these languages provide in communicating with people who speak another language, but particularly because language learning helps develop thinking processes.

It helps children to:

- make discoveries about relationships between words and meaning;
- understand how languages (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* for all Australian schools. However, by making them electives or by failing to allocate sufficient time for a successful language program, we are denying our children the opportunity to develop intercultural and thinking skills that their peers in most other countries have.

### Myth 3

***Other languages reduce children's ability to acquire literacy.***

This is based on the assumption that literacy is dependent on a specific language, and that literacy can be acquired only in English. This is false, as there are obviously many people in the world who become literate through a language other than English. It is clear 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 myth 1. Some languages are more phonemic, this means that the written symbols almost precisely correspond to the sounds. English is not one of these, and starting to read in Indonesian, Spanish, Hungarian or Croatian, for instance, will be easier than

starting to read 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 the success and steady literacy development in two languages on the part of Khmer-English and Farsi-English bilinguals.

### Myth 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 students learn a third language** – even if the languages are not closely related. This is because of a better understanding of how language works. (See flyer on **More Languages, More Benefits**.) Also, learning a third language often develops into a more general interest in languages. It also often stimulates the motivation to maintain and develop a home language other than English the students already know.