With roughly two thirds of the world’s population being bilingual, bilingualism is the norm rather than the exception in many parts of the world.

Previous research has shown that far from being a disadvantage, the bilingual experience has been associated with multiple benefits such as higher educational achievement (Multilingual Britain, 2013), enhanced cognitive flexibility, symbolic representation, and other forms of executive control (Bialystok et al., 2009) in typically-developing children and adults, as long as there is sufficient support to maintain all of the individual’s languages.

Despite the growing prevalence of multilingualism in primary schools in the UK (NALDIC, 2014) and elsewhere, there is little research into multilingualism in children with neurodevelopmental disorders, which affect an estimated 5-12% in the UK (Blackburn, Read & Spencer, 2012). A recent systematic review by Uljarevic et al. (2016) reviewed 50 studies in this area and concluded that: 1) there is no evidence that bilingualism has negative effects on various aspects of functioning across a range of neurodevelopmental disorders; 2) in the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), positive effects of bilingualism on communication and social functioning have been observed; and 3) ‘forced monolingualism’ may be detrimental to communication skills.

In this talk I will focus on two ongoing projects addressing challenges and opportunities language learning experiences present to individuals with typical and atypical cognitive profiles.