

Seven things you did not know yet about bilingual education



The ability to function in two or more languages almost seems like a superpower—so does science. In recent years there has been increasing research into the impact of bilingualism, with the main finding being that it is overwhelmingly positive. (Yes, there was a time when learning an additional language as a child was thought to just bog down the brain. Thank God those days are long gone.) Here are seven reasons why bilingualism is great.

1. Bilingual children have better social skills

Children who grow up bilingually are considered to be more socially intelligent than children of the same age who grow up with only one mother tongue. This study showed that bilingual children were better at assessing other people's interactions: basically, this means they were good at empathizing with others and seeing things from their perspective. The result of development, namely increased interpersonal skills as well as understanding and listening skills, is of course more important in today's world than ever before.

2. Defense against dementia

When we start learning a new language, the mental effort of switching from one language to another sometimes feels physically demanding and tiring. Luckily this fatigue wears off as we get

better; In addition, the mental exertion of learning a foreign language and the associated memory skills also have measurable advantages for our brain and our health. Degenerative diseases like dementia can be kept at bay with regular brain training, and being bilingual has been linked to later onset of dementia and faster recovery from stroke.

Until recently, bilinguals were thought to be smarter, but researchers now say the truth is a little more complex. However, it is still undeniable that language learning is very good brain training. The cognitive benefits are numerous: increased flexibility and adaptability, a better ability to process conflicting information, improved focus, superior problem-solving skills, and mental agility. These are all aspects that form part of a larger concept of multiple intelligences and demonstrate that the benefits of bilingualism are not limited to traditional understandings of intelligence.

4. There is money to be made with bilingualism

Languages increase the balance, both individually and nationally. In Switzerland, where most citizens are fluent in at least two languages, a study has estimated that multilingualism is responsible for as much as 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Conversely, if one looks at monolingualism in combination with a lack of investment in foreign language learning, the risk of financial losses can definitely be identified. The situation in Switzerland is in striking contrast to that in the UK, where the estimated loss of 3.5% of GDP, equivalent to around £48 billion, is attributed to the dogged adherence to English as the sole national language.

If you take a closer look, it quickly becomes clear that while individuals definitely benefit from being multilingual, other factors also play their part,



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such as educational level, industry and geographic region. However, it is difficult to quantify the exact magnitude of such influences. Studies in North America report salary increases of 3-7% (in Canada) and around 1.5-3.8% (in the United States, where German speakers enjoy an estimated \$128,000 extra over their career). In India, English-speakers earn an average of 34% more per hour.

5. Your multicultural self

But let's put our wallets away and look at our society instead. Of course, being bilingual means first and foremost being able to communicate with people from other cultures (and that in itself is a considerable advantage). But raising the bar a little, perhaps the more important point to make is that being bilingual increases empathy. There are studies on cosmopolitanism, open-mindedness and cultural sensitivity that show that multilingual people do better here than people who only speak their mother tongue. How so? Because the experiences of immersing yourself in another language allow you to see things from the perspective of another culture as well.

6. Bilinguals actually perceive the world differently

When one understands and experiences the world using only one language, it is difficult to imagine how a second language would change that perception. But that's what a language does. Just think of the forty different words for snow among Finns, or the often-shared lists of untranslatable words that keep circling social media. By using their respective common language, some cultures experience the world in a much more existential way, have a stronger connection to winter or perhaps have "extremely loud" conversations with the family at lunchtime (Ciao, Italia!). And when you get a glimpse of that culture through

the language, you quickly come across words and phrases that make you wonder how you ever went through life without that particular expression. The answer? You didn't use the word before, but here in your second (or third, fourth, fifth...) culture, it's a key term that hardly anyone thinks about.

7. More widespread than you might think

Coming from its strictly monolingual – and likely English-dominated – culture, the thought may seem far-fetched, but realize that roughly half the world is bilingual, and the number is growing. Currently, there are more Spanish speakers in the US than in Spain, making the United States home to the second largest Spanish-speaking population after Mexico. And to give just one example of English as a second language, the Scandinavian countries have deliberately developed and promoted the notoriously high English proficiency of their populations through the early integration of foreign language learning into the curriculum of their schools, combined with immersive learning techniques. Looking at Asia, at this point in time, we find more people learning English in China than in any other country in the world. Foreign language education is also a priority in Malaysia and Vietnam: parents send their children abroad to learn English or prefer this language to those in neighboring countries.