

The Benefits of a Bilingual Brain

Read the following text about the benefits of a bilingual brain. In pairs decide the adequate order of the paragraphs.

Mia Nacamuli: If you answered, 'si', 'oui' or 'hwe' and you're watching this in English, chances are you belong to the world's bilingual and multilingual majority. And besides having an easier time traveling, or watching movies without subtitles, knowing two or more languages means that your brain may actually look and work differently than those of your monolingual friends. So, what does it really mean to know a language?

Language ability is typically measured in two active parts, speaking and writing and two passive parts, listening and reading. While a balanced bilingual has near equal abilities across the board in two languages, most bilinguals around the world know and use their languages in varying proportions. And depending on their situation and how they acquired each language, they can be classified into three general types.

For example, let's take Gabriella whose family immigrates to the U.S. from Peru when she's two years old. As a compound bilingual, Gabriella develops two linguistic codes simultaneously, with a single set of concepts, learning both English and Spanish as she begins to process the world around her. Her teenage brother on the other hand might be a coordinate bilingual, working with two sets of concepts, learning English in school while continuing to speak Spanish at home and with friends. Finally, Gabriella's parents are likely to be subordinate bilinguals who learn a secondary language by filtering it through their primary language.

Because all types of bilingual people can become fully proficient in a language regardless of accent or pronunciation, the difference may not be apparent to a casual observer. But recent advances in brain imaging technology have given neural linguists a glimpse into how specific aspects of language learning affect the bilingual brain. It's well known that the brain's left hemisphere is more dominant in analytical and logical processes, while the right hemisphere is more active in emotional and social ones, though this is a matter of degree, not an absolute split. The fact that language involves both types of functions while lateralization develops gradually with age, has led to the critical period hypothesis. According to this theory, children learn languages more easily because the plasticity of their developing brains lets them use both hemispheres in language acquisition, while in most adults language is lateralized to one hemisphere, usually the left.

If this is true, learning a language in childhood may give you a more holistic grasp of its social and emotional contexts. Conversely, recent research showed that people who learned a second language in adulthood exhibit less emotional bias, and a more rational approach when confronting problems in the second language

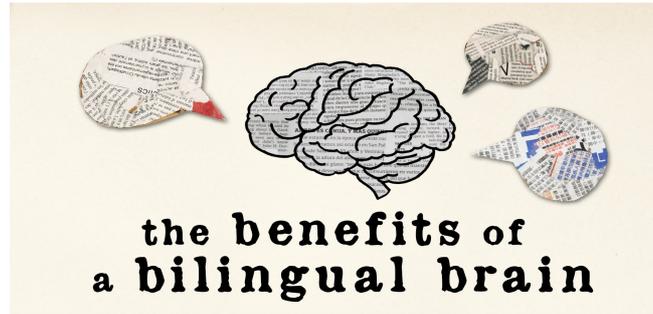
than in their native one.

But regardless of when you acquire additional languages, being multilingual gives your brain some remarkable advantages. Some of these are even visible. Such as, higher density of the grey matter that contains most of your brain's neurons and synapses, and more activity in certain regions when engaging a second language.

The heightened workout a bilingual brain receives throughout its life can also help delay the onset of diseases like Alzheimer's and dementia by as much as five years.

The idea of major cognitive benefits to bilingualism may seem intuitive now, but it would have surprised earlier experts. Before the 1960s, bilingualism was considered a handicap that slowed a child's development by forcing them to spend too much energy distinguishing between languages, a view based largely on flawed studies. And while a more recent study did show that reaction times and errors increase for some bilingual students in cross language tests, it also showed that the effort and attention needed to switch between languages triggered more activity in and potentially strengthened the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. This is the part of the brain that has a large role in executive function: problem solving, switching between tasks and focusing while filtering out irrelevant information.

So while bilingualism may not necessarily make you smarter, it does make your brain more healthy, complex and actively engaged. And even if you didn't have the good fortune of learning a second language as a child, it's never too late to do yourself a favor and make the linguistic leap from 'hello' to 'hola', 'bonjour' or 'nihas', because when it comes to our brains, a little exercise can go a long way.



READING COMPREHENSION

Read the following text about the benefits of a bilingual brain. In pairs decide the adequate order of the paragraphs.

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<p>The heightened workout a bilingual brain receives throughout its life can also help delay the onset of diseases like Alzheimer's and dementia by as much as five years.</p>	
<p>Mia Nacamuli: If you answered, 'si', 'oui' or 'hwe' and you're watching this in English, chances are you belong to the world's bilingual and multilingual majority. And besides having an easier time traveling, or watching movies without subtitles, knowing two or more languages means that your brain may actually look and work differently than those of your monolingual friends. So, what does it really mean to know a language?</p>	
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LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Now watch the video and check your answers. Were you right?

Vocabulary: Underline any new words and discuss them with your partners.

SPEAKING

We're going to have a debate on whether bilingual education is positive or mostly negative for students.

- You will be assigned a role and in groups you will need to think of aspects or ideas that support your point of view.
- You will have a few minutes to write your ideas down and one of you will give a short introduction on the state of the matter.
- You will ALL need to participate.

SOME IDEAS

- Comparison with other educational systems?
- PISA results?
- Alternatives – dual education, immersion, ...?
- Benefits and drawbacks for less advantaged children?
- Special needs?
- Necessary infrastructure and means?
- Ages?
- Bilingual teachers?
- Social equality or does it widen the social gap?
- Etc.