

How Being Bilingual Helps Your Brain (Even If You Learn a New Language in Adulthood)

in [Language, Neuroscience](#) | January 30th, 2024 [1 Comment](#)

There was a time in America, not so very long ago, when conventional wisdom discouraged immigrants from speaking the language of the old country at home. In fact, “it used to be thought that being bilingual was a bad thing, that it would confuse or hold people back, especially children. Turns out we couldn’t have been more wrong.” These words are spoken by one of the variety of multilingual narrators of [the recent BBC Ideas video above](#), which explains “why being bilingual is good for your brain” – not just if you pick up a second language in childhood, but also, and differently, if you deliberately study it as an adult.

“Learning a new language is an exercise of the mind,” says [Li Wei](#) of the Institute of Education at University College London. “It’s the mental equivalent of going to a gym every day.” In the bilingual brain, “all our languages are active, all at the same time.” (This we hear simultaneously in English and the professor’s native Mandarin.) “The continual effort of suppressing a language when speaking another, along with the mental challenge that comes with regularly switching between languages, exercises our brain. It improves our concentration, problem-solving, memory, and in turn, our creativity.”

In this century, some of the key discoveries about the benefits of bilingualism owe to the research of York University cognitive scientist [Ellen Bialystok](#) and her collaborators. Speaking a foreign language, she explains in [this Guardian interview](#), requires using the brain’s “executive control system, whose job it is to resolve competition and focus attention. If you’re bilingual, you are using this system all the time, and that enhances and fortifies it.” In one study, she and her team found that bilinguals with advanced Alzheimer’s could function at the same cognitive levels with milder degrees of the same condition. “That’s the advantage: they could cope with the disease better.”

Mastering a foreign language is, of course, an aspiration commonly held but seldom realized. Based on personal experience, I can say that nothing does the trick quite like moving to a foreign country. But even if you’d rather not pull up stakes, you can benefit from the fact that the internet now provides the greatest, most accessible abundance of language-learning resources and tools humanity has ever known – an abundance [you can start exploring right here at Open Culture](#). If it feels overwhelming to choose just one foreign language from this world of possibilities, feel free to use my system: study seven of them, one for each day of the week. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s Tuesday, which means I’ve got some *français à apprendre*.

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