

WHY FOREIGN LANGUAGE FLUENCY CAN MAKE YOU SMARTER

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Speaking two languages rather than just one has obvious practical benefits in an increasingly globalized world. But in recent years, scientists have begun to show that the advantages of bilingualism are even more fundamental than being able to converse with a wider range of people. Being bilingual, it turns out, makes you smarter. It can have a profound effect on your brain, improving cognitive skills not related to language and even shielding against dementia in old age. The ability to speak a second language isn't the only thing that distinguishes bilingual people from their monolingual counterparts, their brains work different. The positive effects of bilingualism are largely due to the fact that learning a new language involves embracing new concepts that are not represented in our own mother tongue, or are different in the two languages. The collective evidence from a number of studies suggests that the bilingual experience improves the brain's so-called executive function - a command system that directs the attention processes that we use for planning, solving problems and performing various other mentally demanding tasks. These processes include ignoring distractions to stay focused, switching attention willfully from one thing to another and holding information in mind - like remembering a sequence of directions while driving. Why does the tussle between two simultaneously active language systems improve these aspects of cognition? Until recently, researchers thought the bilingual advantage stemmed primarily from an ability for inhibition that was honed by the exercise of suppressing one language system: this suppression, it was thought, would help train the bilingual mind to ignore distractions in other contexts. But that explanation increasingly appears to be inadequate, since studies have shown that bilinguals perform better than monolinguals even at tasks that don't require inhibition, like reading a line through an ascending series of numbers scattered randomly on a page. The key difference between bilinguals and monolinguals may be more basic: a heightened ability to monitor the environment.

Cognitive Effects of Foreign Languages

- Better cognitive function. Individuals who speak two languages show evidence of increased cognitive ability and improved executive function.
- Better attention control. People fluent in two languages can focus their attention on the task at hand while ignoring outside influences.
- Improved memory skills. Research shows that foreign language study improves memory. Individuals who are bilingual can store and recall information more accurately than those who speak only one language. They

also develop better problem-solving skills.

- Increased spatial abilities. Studies show a strong correlation between foreign language study and spatial reasoning ability. This can lead to a superior talent for finding solutions to multi-step problems that occur in fields like mathematics, architecture and the sciences. Bilingual individuals can also exhibit superior skills when it comes to completing tasks like solving puzzles.

- Less age-related cognitive loss. Individuals fluent in a foreign language are less likely to develop dementia or otherwise lose cognitive ability as they age.

Studies show that academic and professional benefits of bilingualism are obvious. Individuals who know two languages tend to perform better on standardized tests. They also achieve better grades and have more self-confidence, develop better decoding and comprehension skills, younger students may also learn to read faster, demonstrate better reasoning and hypothesizing skills, specifically in the field of science. Furthermore, some professional positions require candidates to speak two languages in order to apply.

Educators have hypothesized about the effects of foreign language study for many years, and the research confirms their theories. Studying a foreign language has been proven to have a direct, positive impact on the learner's cognitive skills, academic achievements and professional opportunities. Ultimately, knowing a foreign language can lead to greater cultural awareness and understanding, which can in turn promote better communication among people of dissimilar backgrounds.

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