

Double talk

We know speaking a foreign language is a useful social and career skill. What's less widely known is how it can improve many other areas of your life. *Psychologies* investigates the hidden benefits of being bilingual BY LORNA V

Switching from one language to another effortlessly, having two countries and cultures to enjoy, and a choice of manner of expression are the usual advantages associated with speaking two languages fluently. However, new research reveals that the benefits of being bilingual may go far beyond that.

Whether you grew up speaking an additional tongue because your family was bi-cultural or lived abroad, or you take up a new language in adult life, the evidence is that bilingualism offers a route to greater mental agility, and can even stave off the onset of dementia later in life. And even if you don't speak any

foreign languages yourself, the evidence is strong that your children would benefit from language tuition as early as possible.

'The story we are building in our research is that if you're bilingual, both languages are active. You can't shut one off,' says Professor Ellen Bialystok from York University in Toronto. 'That means that when your brain is using one language, its attention is on not letting the other language get in the way.' Far from being a hindrance, what this means in practice is that bilingual people tend to be better at both multitasking and focusing on single tasks without becoming distracted. >

Je n'avais pas le choix d'apprendre à parler couramment le français, je suis tombée amoureuse d'un homme français

'I had no choice about becoming fluent in French – I fell in love with a Frenchman' Tara Munro, English–French

I had no choice about becoming fluent in French – I fell in love with a Frenchman. It was a *coup de foudre* at a leaving do in London. After half an hour he asked me, 'So when will you visit me in Paris?'

Initially, we commuted by Eurostar to see each other at weekends. However, in 2004, I fell pregnant, so I made a permanent move to France. I had seven or eight years of school French, but dealing with obstetricians and the endless French bureaucracy was a steep learning curve.

I didn't learn any French from Laurent. He said it would be like teaching your partner to drive, and would lead to fights. Instead, I immersed myself in French films and music. Laurent's mother was my saving grace. She never spoke a word of English to me, but her pronunciation is very clear and easy to follow. She and I have a lot in common – we would go shopping for vintage clothes at flea markets, and I learned that way. This led to me setting up my own business, offering guided tours to vintage

shops and markets, although I mostly work in English.

My French side comes out most as a parent. I can hear myself firing off angry words to my sons and it sounds very different from an English telling-off.

In terms of how I express myself, it's interesting that I find it impossible not to do the French hand gestures, shrugs and facial expressions, particularly when I'm emotional. I'm getting grumpier, too, but I don't know if that's a side effect of speaking French or just getting older.

PHOTOGRAPH: PATRICK SWIRC. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: GERSANDRE.
INTERVIEWS: ANITA CHAUDHURI, SOPHIE HERDMAN, CLARE LONGRIGG

< What's fascinating, particularly in multicultural countries, is that being exposed to other languages has an impact on how we relate to others. Research at Hong Kong Polytechnic University by assistant professor Sylvia Xiaohua Chen and Canadian social psychologist Professor Michael Bond came about through their awareness of the way in which personality is affected by language.

What their research (along with further studies around the world) has shown is that language is inextricably connected with culture and identity. 'Language affects people's cultural identity, often in unexpected ways,' says Bond. 'We've found that people express different attitudes depending on the language of the questionnaire, and the ethnicity of the person conducting the research. The results can be surprising. In one study, Hong Kong Chinese people expressed more "Chinese" values when dealing with Western interviewers and when responding in English, and less so in Chinese.'

The context in which we use a language can trigger a difference in attitudes and behaviour, as Professor François Grosjean, a bilingual expert at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland, explains. 'What is seen as a personality change due to language shift may have nothing to do with the language itself,' says the author of *Bilingual: Life And Reality* (Harvard University Press). 'Just think of the way you speak with your best friend, and how this changes with an employer.' For instance, if you spoke Spanish fluently, but mainly used it when on holiday, you might think the language brought out a care-free dimension to your personality, but actually it's all in the situations.

A defence against dementia

One of the latest discoveries in terms of bilingual benefits is that the mechanism in the brain that manages languages is a major protective factor against Alzheimer's and dementia. The Rotman Research Institute in Canada has found that patients diagnosed with probable Alzheimer's experienced a delay of up to five years in onset of symptoms such as memory loss if they spoke two or more languages.

'We discovered that bilingual people suffering from Alzheimer's can function despite the disease setting in,' says Bialystok, who worked on the study. This is because bilingualism contributes to what scientists call cognitive reserve. 'This is like the reserve fuel tank in your car,' she says.

As we get older, learning a language from scratch gets more challenging, but it's worth persevering. 'Language learning is a way of exercising what we call procedural knowledge, the part of the brain we use for activities such as riding a bicycle,' says Professor Itziar Laka of the Mente Bilingue (bilingual brain) research team at the University of the Basque Country. 'Aged 35 to 40, this procedural knowledge muscle begins getting weaker. That's why it's harder to learn to ski, for example. There are studies showing brain-waves change as people learning a language become more proficient. Learning any complex skill that engages the part of the brain that gets lazy is good.'

Laka, however, does have a warning to parents inspired to get their toddlers learning. 'It won't do to stick them in front of the TV with a different language on. Children's brains need the stimulus of a real person speaking the language to them.' How's that as an incentive for you both to take up that French class? >

Facevo finta di capire l'italiano perché volevo fare bella figura davanti a mio padre

'I used to pretend I understood Italian because I wanted to impress my dad' Sara Guidi, English-Italian

I learned to speak Italian from my dad, who is from Italy. He used to speak to me in Italian and sing nursery rhymes, but it took me until about the age of five or six to pick it up. Before that, I used to pretend I understood him, because I wanted to impress him.

Now, my dad and I switch between the two languages, but when it's just us two we speak Italian – I think it makes him happy.

I never think or dream in Italian when I'm in

England, but when I travel to Italy to visit my family, and I'm speaking Italian a lot, most of my thoughts and dreams are in Italian.

I am more open when I'm speaking Italian, as I find Italian people more expressive and warmer. There's more affection when I meet someone new who is Italian – I instantly lose my British reserve. It's quite good in terms of career prospects, too. I tend to take it for granted, but when I tell employers I speak other languages, they're always impressed.

PHOTOGRAPH: HANNAH MAULE; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: AMERLEY OLLENNU. THANKS TO SALUMERIA NAPOLI, 69 NORTH COLE ROAD, LONDON





PHOTOGRAPH: HANNAH MAULE; FFINCH; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: LINDSEY POOLE AT TIME AGENCY

PHOTOGRAPH: SAM BARKER

Falar português me remete à liberdade que tive de me reinventar

'Speaking Portuguese reminds me of the freedom I had to reinvent myself' Alex Bellos, English-Portuguese

When I speak Portuguese, I'm a different person. I like who I am in Portuguese. Brazilians talk with musicality, with a passion.

There are lots of aspects of the language that affect how you speak. For instance, they have a suffix meaning small or nice or cute, and another meaning big or huge or scary, and it's quite possible to use one of these every third word. It's fantastically colourful and musical, and you end up exaggerating everything, so it's massive or it's teeny-weeny-weeny or you love it or it's vile... it lends itself to brilliant stories.

It's also more onomatopoeic than English. You throw yourself into the word. In English, you say,

'I love that', but you might say it with irony. In Portuguese, it's all 'wonderful' or 'marvellous' or 'I adore that'. Speaking Portuguese reminds me of the freedom I had to reinvent myself.

I moved to Brazil for work aged 28, and after six months I was fairly fluent. I wanted to live abroad for a year (which turned into five). My parents speak lots of languages, and this was a new language that neither of them spoke, so it was a way of asserting my own identity.

I don't think Portuguese is difficult. What's complicated is the pronunciation, and the intonation. The language is being reinvented all the time, which is



liberating. Sometimes in English you umm and ahh. There is no umming and ahing in Portuguese. It's all about talking – they like the sound of their language.

'Alex's Adventures In Numberland: Dispatches From The Wonderful World Of Mathematics' by Alex Bellos (Bloomsbury) is out now

我覺得我有兩個自己。一個係中國Jen，另一個係英國Jen

'I feel like I have two selves – English Jen and Chinese Jen' Jen Harvey, English-Chinese

My mum is from Hong Kong, so she raised me speaking Cantonese, while my dad, who is from England, would speak English.

I feel like I have two selves – English Jen and Chinese Jen. Speaking Chinese has a real connection with my childhood, because I always used to talk to my mum in Cantonese, but as I've got older, I've become self-conscious of my accent, so I reply more in English.

I often don't notice if my mum is speaking Cantonese or English. My boyfriend, who is

British, has just moved in with me and my mum, so she is trying to talk to me in English more often. Occasionally, she'll speak Cantonese and I'll think she's spoken in English, and get really confused when he doesn't know what she's said.

I do feel girlier in my Chinese self, because the women in Hong Kong are very feminine. My English-speaking self is much more work-oriented, and a lot more confident. If my mum is telling me off in Chinese it is much scarier than in English. It's not just because she's more

comfortable speaking it – there's just something more intense about the language.

Speaking Cantonese has made me closer to my mum's family, who all live in Hong Kong. It also allows me to get more involved in the culture when I'm out there. I work in marketing and my colleagues are quite impressed because, although a lot of them are bilingual, they speak European languages. Since China is such an enormous economy, everyone is trying to learn an Asian language. >

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE – HOW TO GET STARTED

If you're feeling inspired, but don't know where to start, there are plenty of ways to learn

1 Take a trip

Going on a language holiday can offer a shortcut for learners at every level. Schools, such as ESL (esl-languages.com), advocate staying with a local family, taking language classes in the morning and spending afternoons putting your new-found skills to the test. Better still, swap a hotel for accommodation with native speakers.

2 Armchair immersion

If you can't afford a holiday abroad, there's nothing to stop you from bringing a new culture to your home. Start watching foreign films with subtitles, read basic children's books with a translation dictionary at your side, listen to foreign CDs, find a pen pal and start writing letters. Slowly, you'll begin to understand more and more.

3 Go online

There are dozens of online courses, some free, that offer a multimedia learning experience. According to the Pimsleur method, the most effective way to learn a language is to hear it spoken and to speak it back. The BBC has a free 12-week basic language programme, offering everything

from French and German to Chinese and Portuguese.

Download the podcasts to play in the gym or on your commute. There's even an iPhone app that will give a step-by-step language learning tutorial.

4 Go back to basics

Author and Mind Mapping proponent Tony Buzan recently claimed that the 100 most-spoken words of a language make up 50 per cent of all conversations. Learn 10 new words a day and, after a week-and-a-half, you've learned half a language.

5 Go to sleep

A recent experiment at Duke University, where some students listened to information while sleeping and others didn't, showed we absorb large amounts of information subconsciously while in the land of nod. Realistically, putting on a language CD every time you go to sleep isn't going to work. But, if you combine sleep learning with other techniques, your subconscious mind will absorb more information, and your language memory should improve.

دو زبانه بودن اجازه صحبت مخفیانه میدهد

'Being bilingual allows you to have secret conversations' Farshid Dabesh-Khoy, English-Farsi

I was born in Iran, and we didn't move to the UK until I was 11, so I originally studied English at school as a second language. Finding myself in a London secondary school was challenging, initially.

I now speak English without an accent. Other Iranian guys I know who came at 13 or 14 still have an underlying accent.

At home with my parents, I was forbidden to speak English – the family would be criticised by the community if we did. There was a point where I spoke

in English everywhere else, but thought, counted and talked to myself in Farsi. Gradually, without being conscious of it, it all went to English. I'm not sure if I dream in English or Farsi, mainly I just remember the people or situations.

Even now, I still only speak Farsi at my parents' house. I guess I do use it when I want to express difficult emotions, as the language is deeper than English, maybe, or I associate it with emotions. My wife is Iranian, too, but we mainly

speak English at home. But when we have children, we will change that, because it's important that they get the bilingual experience of their culture, too.

One of the great pleasures of being bilingual is that it allows you to have secret conversations in front of British people. I'm so used to doing this with family members that it comes as a shock when we go back to Iran. We'll be at a party and forget that everyone around us can understand every word. ■



PHOTOGRAPH: HANNAH MAULE-FFINCH