

## Benefits of Learning New Languages—An Irreplaceable Skill

Languages are regarded as the basic medium of communication, and it is common sense that being bilingual or even multilingual allows a person to connect with people across the globe with ease, and gain an upper hand in the workplace. However, with rapid technological advancements, the development of translation devices means that we could now seamlessly shift between a variety of languages without needing to know how to speak in all of them. Is there still a need to learn foreign languages when communication barriers could be overcome by technology? While some may hastily conclude that learning extra languages is becoming less meaningful, it actually brings a multitude of benefits that could foster an individual's all-rounded development and gives him an edge over his counterparts. This essay will target several major benefits of learning other languages and explain why it is still worth doing so even though we have the help of technology.

To commence with, improving and maintaining our intelligence stands out as one of the most prominent benefits of learning new languages, and it has quite a lot to do with how our brains evolve when we are going through this process. As we gradually absorb the five basic components of a foreign language—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, there is a rapid exchange of information between both hemispheres of our brain<sup>i</sup>. Our grey matter grows continuously with the occurrence of new developments in our brain, which means that our brain could harbor more neurons and conduct faster nerve impulse transmissions, an indication of a healthy brain. A study has shown that bilinguals, when compared to monolinguals, have higher grey matter volume and denser grey matter distribution<sup>ii</sup>. Besides, similar to the mechanism of muscle-building, the more we use our non-native languages, the stronger our brain becomes as reflected by a rise in the volume of both the grey matter and the white matter<sup>iii</sup>. Simply put, learning a language is comparable to exercising our brain vigorously all the time, which cannot be done by merely clicking a few buttons and inputting some words to the translation apps.

Additionally, learning new languages has also been proven to slow down the development of various cognitive diseases, which are a major worldwide issue for the elderly. To corroborate this statement, we could

look no further than a recent research, which has shown that bilingual patients of Alzheimer's disease had been diagnosed 4.3 years later and had reported the onset of symptoms 5.1 years later than the monolingual patients<sup>iv</sup>. Solely relying on technology, which does not involve complex coordination of the neurons in the brain as learning a language would do, could contribute little to slowing down the decline of cognitive functions. Therefore, it comes without question that the stimulation of intellectual development brought by learning new languages can hardly be replaced by technology.

Elevating one's competitiveness in the job market and having more career options to choose from is another reason that supports learning new languages. With globalization taking the world by storm, many multinational companies have been establishing their offices, branches or affiliated corporations across the globe. While English is widely practised as an international language, knowing multiple languages could still give a huge advantage to a person—it is inevitable that a proportion of people across the globe could not communicate in English with ease, and reaching out to these “locals” in different countries, would be the most effective by using their native languages, bringing further business opportunities for companies. Hence, firms would value job candidates more if they master languages other than their native tongues—it means companies could reach out to more potential customers, gain their trust and establish more business links across a wide range of countries.

However, the good things do not just stop there; as languages are mediums of cultures, mastering different languages means that it is more likely for workers to come across an array of cultures, facilitating their development of intercultural sensitivity. A study has proven that multilingual employees have better capabilities of taking others' perspectives<sup>v</sup>, a soft skill highly valued by large firms as it could allow the workers to solve clients' requests from what the clients' envision instead of what the workers observe on the surface. Hence, with more multilingual employees, it is easier for companies to identify the needs and expectations of their global clients based on their understanding of their clients' unique cultures, and to provide better customized services<sup>vi</sup>—this is exactly why companies have a tendency to hire multilingual employees. It is obvious that intercultural

sensitivity cannot be cultivated by using translation software, which is more of a tool for us to use rather than a skill we can acquire.

Lastly, a commonly neglected benefit of learning new languages is that it enhances our ability to multitask, a skill possessed by countless elites worldwide. As mentioned above, as we learn non-native languages, information is exchanged quickly within our brain, and the velocity of this process only escalates when we have to switch between different languages while meeting people all around the world, creating a huge workload within our brain. With the repetition of this demanding coordination within our neurons, our brain will gradually get used to it thanks to its neuroplasticity. Since switching between languages is one of the most complex multitasking missions (considering the aforementioned linguistic elements of a language), it becomes easier for our brain to maintain a high level of functioning when we are handling a series of tasks simultaneously.

For proof of this, we could venture no further than a prime example: according to research partly funded by the National Institutes of Health in the US, when children were asked to switch from animals to a color and press a different computer key for the new category, bilinguals were faster at making the change than monolinguals<sup>vii</sup>. Being able to multitask means that one could work more quickly and efficiently across their working hours, contributing to higher labor productivity. It also allows us to look upon a task or challenge from a wider point of view<sup>viii</sup>, a crucial trait in the workplace that translation technology could hardly help us develop. Imagine getting yet another edge over your peers just by learning more languages—it is surely nothing short of an absolute bargain!

In this digitalized 21st century, our lives have been made easier with the aid of technology—the meteoric rise of translation devices and AI-powered translation functions in our mobile phones indicate that it is no longer a necessity to communicate with others only by speaking in their native languages. However, we should still recognize the importance of learning foreign languages—not only could it help us become smarter, but it could also elevate our competitiveness in the workplace and enable us to multitask. It is always encouraged to learn a new language although it is not a must, because after all, it is more than just communication with foreigners!

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- <sup>ii</sup> Ramin Skibba, “How a second language can boost the brain”, Knowable Magazine, <https://knowablemagazine.org/content/article/mind/2018/how-second-language-can-boost-brain>, 29/11/2018
- <sup>iii</sup> Content Team, “What happens to your brain when you learn a new language?”, Unbabel, <https://unbabel.com/what-happens-to-your-brain-when-you-learn-a-new-language/>, 19/2/2019
- <sup>iv</sup> Fergus I.M. Craik, PhD, Ellen Bialystok, PhD, and Morris Freedman, MD, “Delaying the onset of Alzheimer disease: Bilingualism as a form of cognitive reserve”, Neurology Journals, <https://www.neurology.org/doi/10.1212/wnl.0b013e3181fc2a1c>, 9/11/2010
- <sup>v</sup> All Things Considered, “Studies Suggest Multilingual Exposure Boosts Children's Communication Skills”, National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/2016/03/21/471316384/studies-suggest-multilingual-exposure-boosts-childrens-communication-skills?t=1658044561919>, 21/3/2016
- <sup>vi</sup> Oliver Batham-Hendrei, “8 key benefits of multilingualism in today’s workplace”, Preply Business, <https://preply.com/en/blog/b2b-multilingual-workforce/>, 20/6/2024
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- <sup>viii</sup> “What is multitasking and what are its main pros and cons?”, Iberdrola, <https://www.iberdrola.com/talent/multitasking>, 18/9/2024