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HOW BILINGUALISM AFFECTS YOUR BRAIN AND COGNITIVE ABILITIES

Do you speak Spanish? French? Perhaps Chinese? If you responded to these questions or are reading this in English, chances are you're among the bilingual or multilingual majority of the world. Besides making travel easier or watching movies without subtitles, knowing two or more languages means that your brain might look and function a bit differently from that of your monolingual friends. So, what does it actually mean to know a language? Language abilities are typically measured by two active skills speaking and writing and two passive ones listening and reading. Bilinguals around the world possess varying proportions of these abilities depending on how and under what circumstances they learned each language. There are three main types of bilingualism. Take Oksana, whose family moved from Ukraine to the U.S. when she was two. As a compound bilingual, she learns English and Ukrainian simultaneously, forming a single system of concepts for both languages. Her teenage brother may be a coordinate bilingual, using separate sets of concepts: he learns English in school but speaks Ukrainian at home. Oksana's parents, on the other hand, are likely subordinate bilinguals, processing the second language through the lens of their native one. Although these differences are not always obvious, new brain scanning technologies allow neurolinguistics to observe how language learning affects the bilingual brain. The left hemisphere is known to dominate in analytical and logical tasks, while the right is more active in emotional and social processes. However, language involves both hemispheres, and the critical period of brain development in childhood allows children to learn languages more easily.

Adults who decide to learn new languages later in life might exhibit reduced emotional bias compared to those who have been bilingual from a young age; however, the advantages of multilingualism can be enjoyed at any stage of life. Engaging in multiple languages not only heightens brain activity but also contributes positively to gray matter density, and it may even have the potential to postpone cognitive decline and the onset of dementia. Interestingly, in the 1960s, being bilingual was often viewed as a disadvantage; nonetheless, today's research reveals that the act of switching between languages stimulates essential brain regions, thereby improving executive functions, enhancing concentration, and aiding in the filtering out of irrelevant information. This shift in understanding highlights the transformative impact that language learning can have on cognitive health and overall brain function.

While bilingualism may not necessarily increase your intelligence levels, it certainly contributes positively to your brain's health and resilience, enabling it to better adapt to various cognitive challenges. Regardless of whether you picked up a second language during your formative years or are considering it now, it's important to know that it's never too late to embark on this enriching journey, no matter if you start with simple greetings like hola, bonjour, or 你好. Engaging in this kind of mental exercise can provide significant benefits to your cognitive functions, making it a worthwhile endeavor for people of all ages. After all, nurturing your brain through learning a new language fosters not only health but also a deeper understanding of diverse cultures. Moreover, embracing different languages can bridge gaps between communities, promoting empathy and global awareness. By exploring new linguistic landscapes, we enrich our perspectives and cultivate connections that transcend borders.

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