

Benefits of being bilingual



1 Work in pairs. Look at the statements below about being bilingual or multilingual and decide if they are true or false.

1. Children whose parents speak to them in more than one language will speak both languages badly.
2. Bilingual children do better at school.
3. Bilinguals are less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease.
4. It is impossible to become fluent in another language once you are an adult.
5. With each language you learn, the process gets easier.

2 Read the text and check your answers

Some facts about bilingualism that may surprise you

It is estimated that more than half the world's population is bilingual, and, in an increasingly globalised world, there are obvious benefits to speaking more than one language. However, for many years, parents were discouraged from teaching their children to speak more than one language from birth. Learning two or more languages simultaneously was believed to cause confusion and slow down academic development. While it is certainly true that children who are learning to speak more than one language as their mother tongue will often mix the languages up or speak a little later, these are temporary problems, and no reason to avoid teaching a child both their parents' languages.

In fact, there are plenty of reasons to encourage your child to become bilingual from birth. As well as the obvious benefits of being able to communicate with more people, and the possibility of earning more money, children who speak more than one language have been shown to score more highly in achievement tests at school. This is true for mathematics as well as tests of verbal skills.

And in later life it has been found that bilinguals, on average, will tend to develop Alzheimer's disease five years later than monolingual speakers. Speaking three or more languages offers even more protection. It seems that the increased number of connections within the brain allows bilinguals to cope better with brain damage.

But is it too late if you haven't already learned a second language in childhood? It used to be thought that the adult brain was very fixed, but recent research has shown that we continue to develop new connections in the brain throughout our lives, meaning that it's perfectly possible to learn another language to a high standard. Older learners are less likely to have native-like pronunciation, but they are better at learning vocabulary as they are able to use far more skills and strategies than children. And learning a language is like using a muscle – the more you use it the stronger it gets, meaning that you will find your third language easier than your second, and so on.

3 Did anything in the text surprise you? Tell your partner. What are your reasons for learning a second (or third or fourth) language?

4 Look back at the text and underline the phrases which mean the same as the following sentences.

- 1 People estimate that more than half the world's population is bilingual.
- 2 People believed that learning two or more languages simultaneously caused confusion.
- 3 Researchers have shown that children who speak more than one language score more highly in achievement tests.
- 4 Researchers have found that bilinguals will tend to develop Alzheimer's disease five years later than monolingual speakers.
- 5 People used to think that the adult brain was very fixed.

5 Read the grammar explanation below. Then label each of the sentences you underlined in the text A or B.

Impersonal report structures

When we want to report what people generally say or believe or what research has found, we can use an impersonal report structure. There are two ways of doing this:

A *It + passive*

e.g. It is believed that English is one of the easier languages to learn.

B *Subject + passive + infinitive*

e.g. English is believed to be one of the easier languages to learn.

The passive form can, of course, be in any appropriate tense.

6 Complete the second sentence so that it means the same as the first.

1 People say that the best way to learn a foreign language is to live in the country.

Living in the country _____

2 People used to think that adults couldn't lose the accent from their first language.

It _____

3 People estimate that over 1,500 different languages are spoken in India.

It _____

4 People estimate that only 20 per cent of Americans speak a second language.

Only 20 per cent of Americans _____

5 A hundred years ago, people considered that talking to a baby in two languages was a bad thing.

A hundred years ago, talking to a baby in two languages _____

7 Write five sentences (about anything) using an impersonal report structure and a verb from the box below. They can be true or false. Read the sentences to your partner. Can they guess which sentences are true?

say	think	believe	consider	estimate	show	prove	find
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