

Speaking two languages: Benefit or burden?

*Common questions about bilingualism
and what research tells us.*

1. Why bother?

Since most people from other countries speak some English, there's no use in British people learning another language. *Not true.*

There are a number of reasons why knowing another language can have benefits, even for speakers of a globally powerful language!

- **Cultural:** Contrary to what many English speakers think, many people from other regions have little English ability or don't feel comfortable speaking English. Also, bilingualism goes beyond simply being able to communicate.
- **Economic:** There can be economic advantages to knowing another language even if you are a speaker of an international language like English.
(See answer to Question 2 for more details.)
- **Cognitive:** Research has shown a number of different benefits to being bilingual in how the brain functions at various life stages.

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Cultural (social) benefits:

- Even knowing a bit of another language signals an openness and equal footing with respect to other communities, which fosters greater social cohesion and tolerance. Studies of children have shown bilingual children have more positive attitudes to other groups.
- Bilinguals and multilinguals show greater 'tolerance of ambiguity' than monolinguals, i.e. they tend to see unfamiliar situations as positive or desirable.
- This personality trait has been studied in organisations, businesses, and classrooms, and relates to flexibility, adaptability, learning, and having positive experiences in diverse groups and situations.

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[Jean-Marc Dewaele and Li Wei. 2013. 'Is multilingualism linked to a higher tolerance of ambiguity?' Bilingualism: Language and Cognition 16 (1): 231-240.]

Summary at <http://qmulbilingualism.wordpress.com/2013/06/24/multilingualism-and-personality/>

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Cognitive (brain) benefits during childhood:

Young bilingual children develop selected learning abilities faster than monolingual children (age range 4-9 years). Some examples:

- Awareness that different speech forms can refer to the same object
- Awareness that phonology, syntax, and semantics are separate
- Ability to understand another person's state of knowledge

Cognitive (brain) benefits during lifetime:

- Ability to focus on a detail while ignoring irrelevant distractors

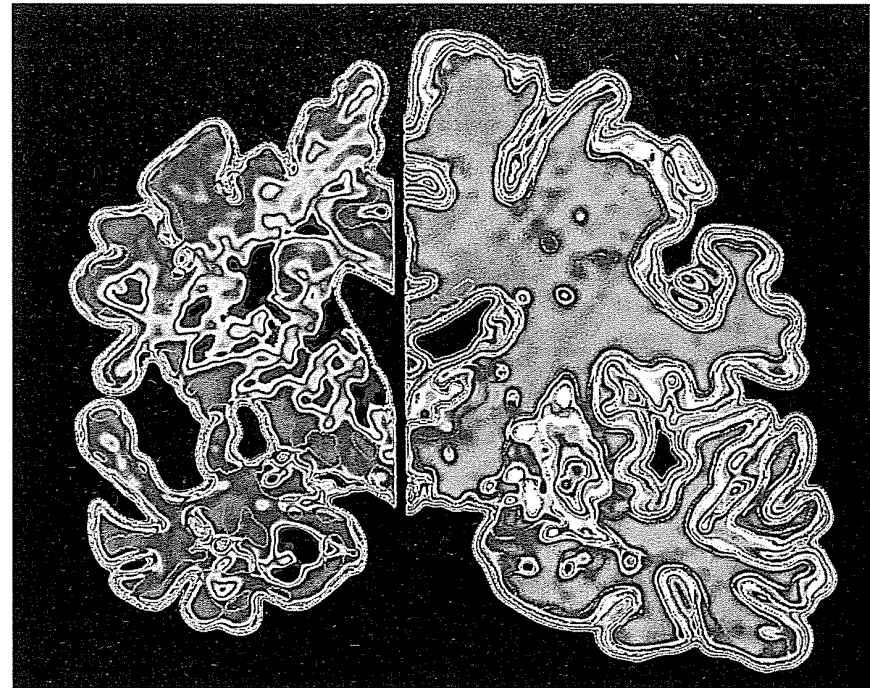
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Cognitive (brain) benefits during old age:

- Studies have found that the signs of dementia (e.g. in Alzheimer's disease) started later in older people who were bilingual or multilingual for most of their lives
- Monolingual group = 71.4 years
- Bilingual group = 75.5 years



Vertical slices of a normal brain, right, and an Alzheimer's brain show shrinkage in the latter.

[Craik F.I., Bialystok E. & Freedman M. 2010. Delaying the onset of Alzheimer disease: bilingualism as a form of cognitive reserve. *Neurology* 75 (19), 1726-1729.]

2. Economic advantage

Spending time learning a language won't help me when I finish my studies and try to get a job. *Not true.*

There are several reasons why, even in the UK, speaking another language is an asset:

- Speaking more than one language has been shown to improve people's ability to get a job
- In some cases, it also corresponds to better salaries
- The British Chambers of Commerce (the organisation of British businesses) regularly cites a need in the UK for better language skills

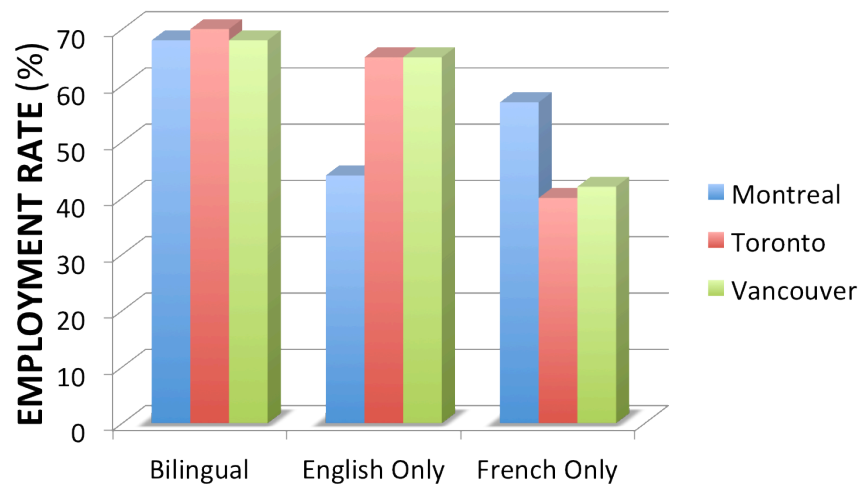
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Getting a job and a good salary

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The need in Britain

- Even though English is a powerful language, the British Chambers of Commerce (i.e. British businesses) always want more bilinguals
- They say that the UK lags behind in international commerce because of their lack of language abilities
- See: <http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/press-office/press-releases/duplicate-of-bcc-knowledge-gaps-and-language-skills-hold-back-exporters.html>
- Even if your foreign business partner speaks English, the fact that you studied their language even a bit, and so learned about aspects of their culture, can positively influence business negotiations.

3. Immigrants must choose

If immigrants in Britain want to learn English properly, they need to stop speaking their heritage language. *Not true.*

- The brain is not a container that ‘fills up’ with just one language and has no room for others. The brain is very flexible and can learn many systems equally well, especially if learning is at a young age.
- The same goes for social groups: it is not the case that for social cohesion a group must have just one language, nor is it the case that if a group speaks a different language they are necessarily unable to integrate into a wider community.
- Forcing people to abandon a language can cause breakdowns in generational relations and social isolation in communities and families.

4. Mixing means mistakes

When bilingual children or adults mix their languages together, it means they haven't learned the languages properly. *Not true.*

The natural mixing of languages by bilinguals is called code-switching.

- Code-switching requires a sophisticated understanding of the rules of both languages. It does not mean random mixing.
- In some cases, code-switching does arise because a person is not fully fluent in one or another language, but more often it arises because the two languages together signal a particular social identity

[Zentella, Ana Celia. 1997. *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Oxford: Blackwell.]

Auer, Peter (ed.). 1998. *Code-switching in conversation: Language, Interaction, and Identity*. London: Routledge.]

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Code-switching is common in language contact at any time in history.

- Medieval English poetry (13th – 15th century) mixed English, French, and Latin
- Sometimes code-switching helps people maintain an ability in two languages (e.g. 'Spanglish' in the United States or Welsh-English mixing in Wales).
- Ironically, when parents forbid mixing in order to maintain a 'pure' heritage language, children often lose their heritage language even faster because they feel more insecure about how well they speak the language.

[Schendel, Herbert. 1997. To London From Kent/Sunt predia depopulantes: code-switching and medieval England macaronic poems. VIEWS 2/2.

Siegel, Jeff. 2003. 'Indian languages in Fiji: Present, past and future. In Sharma & Annamalai (eds.) *Indian diaspora: In search of identity*. Mysore: CIL Publ.]

5. School performance

A bilingual child will not do as well as others in school. *Not true.*

In general, research finds that:

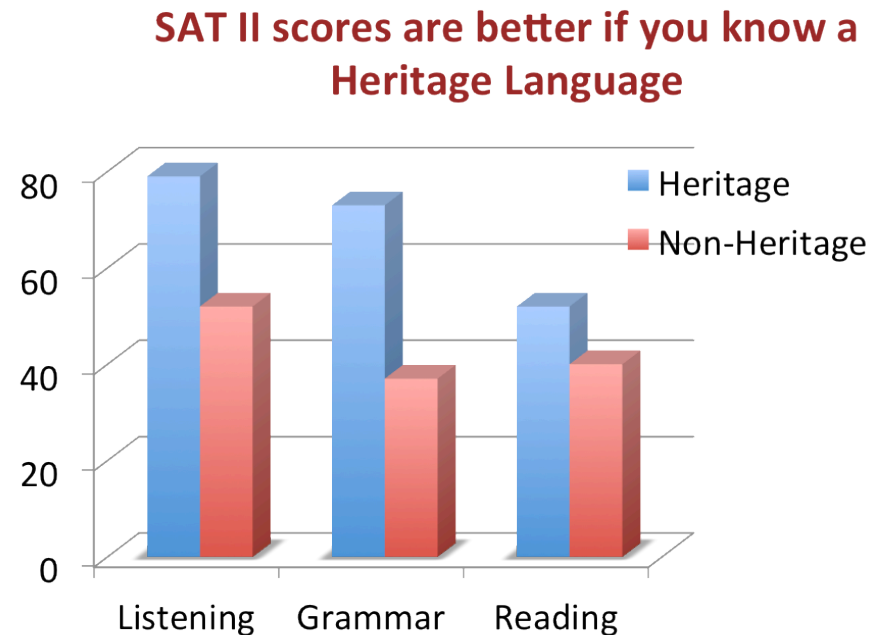
- Initial lag in language learning if a new language is being acquired at school, particularly if the language is stigmatised and learning is not supported
- But also faster ability to learn language in general as well as several cognitive advantages, noted earlier
- No lag after initial period
- Some studies indicate higher academic performance among bilinguals
- Many regions (e.g. South Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe) are traditionally bilingual but associated with high academic achievement.

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In some cases, bilingual children outperform other groups because of cultural factors, home environment, parental expectations:



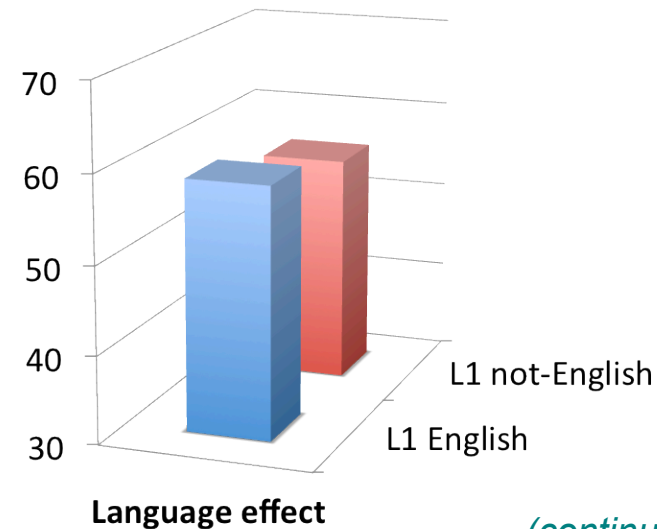
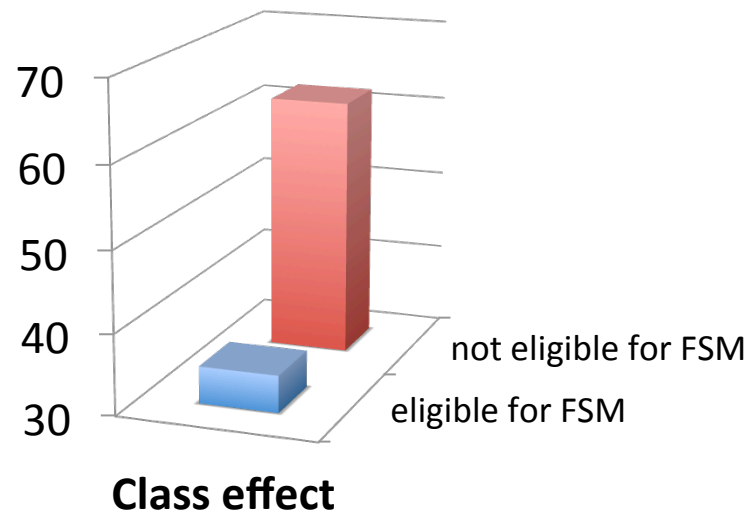
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In the UK:

- Having a non-English first language (L1) is linked to class, because of immigration.
- When class (FSM=free school meal) is taken into account, it is class (due to limited resources), not L1, that influences school performance.



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[Based on National Statistics produced by the Department of Education, February 2012, approved by the UK Statistics Authority. See also Department of Education Report (2012). GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England: 2010 to 2011.]

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In the UK:

“Quite simply, there are many minority ethnic groups who perform better at GCSE than the white population and, for those who perform less well, the evidence suggests that this is linked to social class much more than to ethnicity.” (Kapadia 2010)

- Ramesh Kapadia. 2010. ‘Ethnicity and Class: GCSE performance’, BERA 2010, Institute of Education, based on GCSE performance in 2005-2007.
- Department of Education Report (2012). GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England: 2010 to 2011.
- C. Hamnett, M. Ramsden, and T. Butler (2007). Social background, Ethnicity, School Composition, and Educational Attainment in East London. *Urban Studies* 44

6. Language development

A child's language development will be slower if they are bilingual. *Not true.*

Bilingual children reach important milestones within the same age span as their monolingual peers:

- onset of canonical babbling [e.g. Oller et al., 1997]
- first words [e.g. Nicoladis & Genesee, 1997]
- *rate* of vocabulary growth [e.g. Pearson et al., 1997]
- syntactic development in dominant language [e.g. Paradis & Genesee, 1996]
- Social awareness of appropriate language use [e.g. Lanza., 1997]

Differences are influenced by amount of input:

(i.e. not cognitive delay but language dominance and environment)

- Vocabulary size may be smaller, but total bilingual vocabulary exceeds monolinguals'
- Vocabulary type and register may be restricted
- Differences in stages of acquisition, but these are temporary [MacSwan 2005]

7. Early learning is better

It's a good idea to learn languages young, because adults can't learn languages as well as children do. *True.*

- Studies show that the earlier an L2 is acquired, the more likely proficiency in that language is to be obtained

[Johnson & Newport, 1989; Yeni-Komshian, Flege & Liu, 2000]

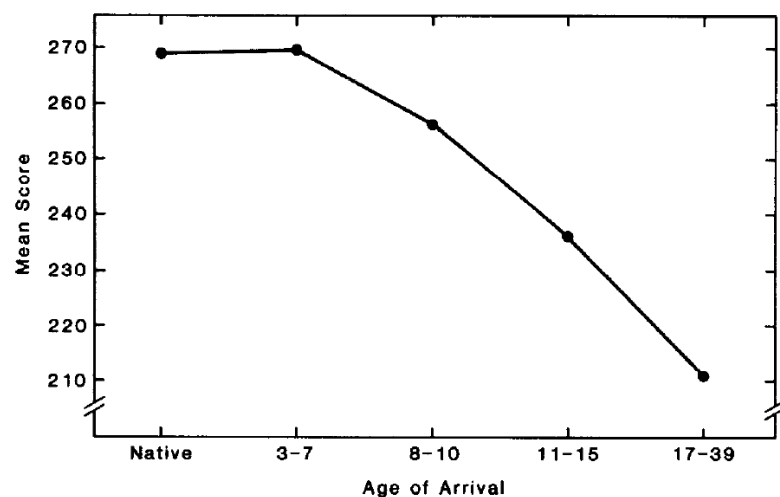


FIG. 1. The relationship between age of arrival in the United States and total score correct on the test of English grammar.

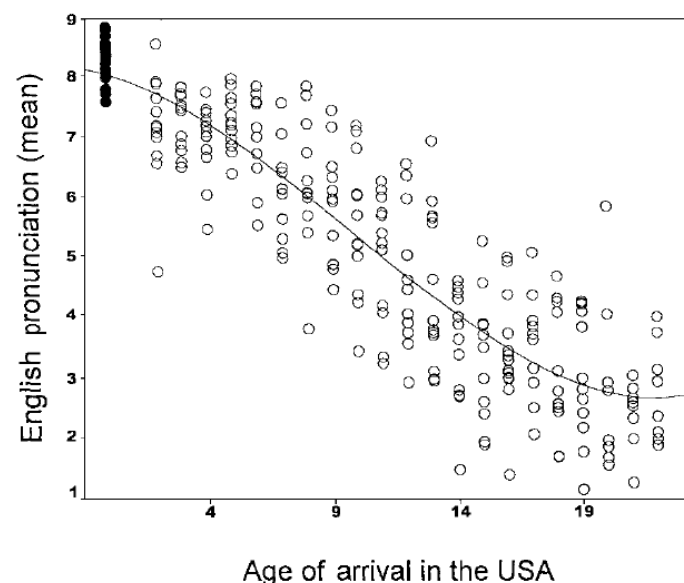


Figure 1. English pronunciation scores as a function of AOA for 240 Korean-English bilinguals and pronunciation scores for 24 English monolinguals (filled circles, top left). The fitted curve is the third order polynomial function between AOA and pronunciation.

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- However, the *reasons* for an age effect are not entirely understood
- Many interpret the effect as biologically hard-wired [e.g. Birdsong 1999, DeKeyser 2000]
- But some complicating evidence includes:
 - No consistent age at which the decline occurs across studies [e.g. Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley 2003]
 - Native-like phonetic and grammatical ability in some advanced adult L2 learners
 - Age is linked to other factors (e.g. overall balance of exposure to each language)
 - Degree of structural similarity between first and second language can affect learning
- Other possible reasons for an age effect:
 - *Environment*: Overall exposure to each language is very different in child vs. adult learning
 - *Cognition*: Diverse aspects of cognitive and brain states affect language learning
 - *Social factors*: Child and adult learners differ in terms of self-consciousness, motivation, language-linked identity etc., which can influence attention and learning

8. Parents as language teachers

For a child to learn a language well, parents have to teach them properly.

Not true.

- Consider this real-life example —

Parent:	Eat your food.
Child:	I eated it.
Parent:	Say “I ate it.”
Child:	I eated it.
Parent:	No, say “I ate it.”
Child:	You eated it!
- The child focuses on communicative goals, not explicit teaching.
- Learning to speak a language is instinctive and implicit. It is not related to explicit teaching or literacy.
 - In their early years, children move through predictable stages of acquiring pronunciation and grammar, even if these are never taught explicitly.
 - As early as 4 or 5, *before* school starts, children have acquired the main elements of their carers’ language(s).
 - So bilingual parents can stop worrying about being teachers and focus on providing lots of fun spoken interaction instead!