

# The Importance of Students' Learning French as a Second Language

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## Abstract

*Being bilingual is advantageous in almost all aspects of life. Bilingualism positively and permanently alters the mind and the brain. Being bilingual is more rewarding than being monolingual due to superior communication skills, enhanced executive functions, a delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease, and contributions to the Canadian economy. Learning a second language is the doorway to a child's future, and encouraging our youth to sustain their bilingualism or become bilingual is a necessary investment in our nation's future.*

Does being bilingual shape the mind? For years, the negative consequences of bilingualism were emphasized, including a warning to parents that speaking two languages created mental deficiency in children (Bernal, 1983). In 1962, Peal and Lambert offered a profoundly different answer; they revealed that bilingual (French- and English-speaking) children in Montreal surpassed monolingual (English-speaking only) children in a variety of areas. The majority of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual (Marian & Shook, 2012), and research shows that being bilingual is advantageous (Bialystok & Craik; Flores & Soto, 2012; Tucker, 1999). The importance of having students learn French as a second language can be explained through two key components: how speaking a second language immeasurably enhances one's livelihood and opportunities, and the practical implications of being and becoming bilingual.

## Enhanced Livelihood and Opportunities

Learning a second language is the doorway to a child's future. Having the command of more than one language not only improves the brain's ability to focus, but physically changes the mind, resulting in a stronger, more creative thought process (Roitman, 2013). The capability to speak both English and French positively alters the mind and the brain (Marian & Shook, 2012), enriching bilinguals' lives in key areas: superior communication (Roitman, 2013), an enhanced executive function (Luo, Craik, Moreno, & Bialystok, 2012), a delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease (Craik, Bialystok, & Freedman, 2010), and benefits to the Canadian economy (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).

## Superior Communication

Some companies spend a great deal of money boosting their employees' communication skills. Good communicators increase a company's productivity, global business opportunities, positive relationships, and employee morale (Johnson, 2013). These factors translate into dollars and success, which all businesses strive for. There are close ties between a country's economic growth and the country's cognitive skills (Hanushek, 2011). How, exactly, is knowing more than one language beneficial? While engaging in oral dialogue in one's first language, it is rare to consider the grammatical structures of the native tongue (Roitman, 2013). Learning a second language brings these grammatical structures to the forefront, as the focus suddenly shifts to the order of words, verb tenses, and parts of speech. Bilinguals are not only stronger oral communicators, but also better listeners.

Communication includes both conveying words and listening attentively. The ability to listen closely is a valuable skill that can translate into a real dollar value (Roitman, 2013). Bilingual individuals of all ages can better attend to a speaker and ignore distracting stimuli, resulting in one who can focus better on what a client, boss, or employee is saying (Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2009; Luo et al., 2012; Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008). The bilingual benefit has more

do to with an attentional advantage in selectivity and inhibition than with metalinguistic knowledge (Bialystok & Craik, 2010).

As a beginning French language learner, I placed, out of necessity, one hundred percent of my auditory attention on the speaker's words. My vision was focused solely on the French speaker's mouth. At first, the inability to focus on anything except the speaker struck me as bizarre. Eventually, I found myself transferring this skill to communications in the English language. I was soon able to tune out distractions and focus sole attention on the speaker in both French and English conversations, an operation of the executive function – the centre responsible for managing the brain's cognitive abilities and processes such as attention and inhibition (Marian & Shook, 2012).

### **Enhanced Executive Functions**

Bilingualism increases one's ability to focus when distractions are present, to decide between differing alternatives, and to disregard irrelevant information (Schwartz, 2011). Having the command of more than one language also keeps executive functions more efficient (Bialystok et al., 2009; Craik et al., 2010; Luo et al., 2012). Bilinguals are faster than monolinguals in both conflict and congruent conditions, and demonstrate advantages in task switching, another role executive functions play (Luo et al., 2012). Being bilingual does not simply change the way neurological structures process information, but it also may alter the neurological structures themselves (Marian & Shook, 2012). Martin-Rhee & Bialystok (2008) conducted a study involving bilingual and monolingual children and their performances on the Simon task. The results were conclusive: the increased ability to focus that is maintained by bilingualism positively influences the lifelong development of executive functions.

To maintain a balance between two languages, a bilingual's brain relies on executive functioning. Bivalent representations, for bilinguals, offer differing, potentially competing response options (Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008). Bilinguals manage these conflicts by attending to the relevant language system and ignoring the nonessential system to ensure fluent speech. Bilinguals solve tasks that require an individual to select one of two differentiating stimuli more efficiently than monolinguals (Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008). The Simon task was used by Martin-Rhee & Bialystok (2008) to examine the differences in executive functioning between monolingual and bilingual adults (aged 20-80 years old): "In the study with middle-aged and older participants . . . the bilinguals performed better than monolinguals in all conditions and the size of the advantage increased with age, indicating a less severe decline in performance with aging for the bilinguals" (p. 82). The constant exercise of attention required by executive functions, across the lifespan, leads to the advantage of bilinguals over monolinguals (Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008). I have been involved in a considerable number of experiences acting as a translator for those wishing to converse, but who could otherwise not due to a language barrier. The ability to switch between languages as circumstances dictate, when frequently exercised throughout one's life, keeps executive functions strong (Bialystok et al., 2009; Craik et al., 2010; Luo et al., 2012).

### **Delayed Onset of Alzheimer's Disease**

Research presents differences regarding when monolinguals and bilinguals are diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Craik et al. (2010) conducted a study involving over two hundred monolingual and bilingual participants. Though there is evidence that executive functions are protected against age-related dementias through a variety of factors, the relation is unclear "whether intellectual, social, and physical activities genuinely improve cognitive performance, or whether individuals with better-functioning brains (perhaps for genetic reasons) are more likely to perform well intellectually and are also protected naturally against the onset of dementia" (Craik et al., p. 1726). Most bilinguals speak two languages because of circumstances that

require it, not because they are naturally gifted language learners (Craik et al.). Craik et al.'s study revealed that bilingual patients were diagnosed with Alzheimer's 4.3 years later than their monolingual counterparts; bilinguals reported the onset of Alzheimer symptoms 5.1 years later than the monolingual patients (p. 1726).

A follow-up study by Schweizer, Ware, Fischer, Craik, & Bialystok (2012) compared the brains of bilinguals and monolinguals, matched on the severity of Alzheimer symptoms. In regions commonly associated with Alzheimer's disease, the brains of bilingual participants showed a notable increase in physical degeneration; yet bilinguals performed on par developmentally, even though the amount of brain damage suggested bilinguals' symptoms should be more advanced (Schweizer et al., 2012). Schweizer et al. (2012) concluded what many researchers had already discovered: lifelong bilingualism protects against the onset of Alzheimer's disease (Craik et al., 2010; Luo et al., 2012; Bialystok et al., 2009). Due to more stable executive functions, a delay of bilinguals' symptoms of Alzheimer's disease four years after their monolingual counterparts is far greater than any effect associated with drugs (Craik, et al., 2010). This delay of symptoms represents extensive savings in health care costs (Bialystok & Craik, 2010).

### **Benefits to the Canadian Economy**

Proficiency in both French and English is a large factor for Canadian employers. Bilingualism fosters connections with French-speaking nations abroad (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013), and translates into a real dollar value: higher achieving persons have an increased lifetime income (Hanushek, 2011). Canadian employers intentionally seek bilingual candidates (Roitman, 2013), as trade with French-speaking countries boosts the Canadian economy (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013). Trade volumes with French-speaking countries would be significantly reduced if not for the 30% of Canadians, mostly residents of Quebec and New Brunswick, who speak French (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 24). In 2011, "bilingual Canada's" locations (Quebec and New Brunswick) exported 2.7 billion dollars to countries that designate French as an official language, while imports from these countries totaled 9.3 billion dollars (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 24). If "bilingual Canada's" trade with French-speaking countries was applied to "less bilingual Canada's" locations (all provinces and territories except Quebec and New Brunswick), exports to French-speaking countries and imports from French-speaking countries would have been just 1.1 billion dollars and 2.1 billion dollars, respectively, in 2011 (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 24). In 2011, "bilingual Canada's" proficiency in French boosted trade by approximately 8.5 billion dollars (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 36), fostering connections with French-speaking nations).

My current position as a Basic French teacher provides a clear indication of the need for French-speaking individuals. My employer conveyed to me, upon being successfully hired, the item that most set my resume apart from the rest of the job applicants was my ability to speak French. I received a permanent teaching contract the year following graduation with my education degree, an accomplishment practically unheard of in my school division. I am confident that my bilingualism increased my employability. Having the command of more than one language has been linked to reaching a universal diligence that opens the consciousness to broader worldviews of the way of life (Schwartz, 2011).

Cognitive processes are heavily dependent on linguistic abilities (Bialystok & Craik, 2010). Bilinguals' lives are enriched in many aspects: superior communication (Roitman, 2013), enhanced executive functions (Luo et al., 2012), a delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease (Craik et al., 2010), and benefits to the Canadian economy (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013). These assets, and the reality that many Anglophones outside Quebec do not retain their bilingualism as they age (Statistics Canada, 2013), have serious implications in a school-based setting.

## Practical Implications of Bilingualism

Exposing learners to our province's French culture and providing them with the opportunity to learn French are key components in preserving Manitoba's heritage. Developing French-speaking individuals who are aware of the French culture fosters lifelong investment in these students' education and self-esteem, in addition to other measures in which bilinguals' lives are enriched through language diversity. In the two decades prior to 2011, the number of Basic French students in Canada decreased by 24%, and the number of schools that offered Basic French programs was reduced by 9% (Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 4). To ensure successful language learning experiences for Anglophones, with the ultimate goal being fluency in French and English, educators must foster students' confidence, success, and motivation; and have high quality teachers in every French classroom.

For the past decade, the Brandon School Division (BSD) has been involved in efforts to increase French-speaking capabilities within its middle years students (grades 4 to 8). The BSD currently has 3,300 students enrolled in middle years, and approximately 70% are enrolled in the Basic French Program (D. Guernieau, personal communication, November 1, 2013). In the BSD's English-speaking schools, students in grades 4 through 6 must participate in Basic French; students in grades 7 and 8 can choose whether they wish to participate in the Basic French program. The number of students in the BSD who choose to participate in Basic French has decreased by 9% since 2010, despite efforts to foster students' confidence, success, and motivation; and to have high quality teachers in every French classroom.

While we readily comprehend the extensive benefits of bilingualism, a further question arises: how can educators encourage students to learn both English and French? Laing (2011) extensively researched factors influencing student motivation in the French language classroom. Her work is straightforward, yet profound. Students learning French may experience a lack of confidence and thus struggle to find meaning in their study of French (Laing, 2001). Learners must believe that they are capable of performing a task in order to make an attempt; learners who believe that they are incapable are unwilling to make an attempt, as they believe doing so will reveal their inadequacies. When students experience achievement, the likelihood of a positive self-concept increases, encouraging continued success (Laing, 2011). Students who experience a sense of satisfaction from their learning are motivated in further accomplishments – the cyclical process of confidence, success, and motivation results. Exceptional teachers aim to create high motivation in their students. Every classroom should have a high quality teacher (Hanushek, 2011).

Students who have above-average teachers achieve more (Hanushek, 2011). Teachers in successful language education programs are well trained and have cultural competence and high subject-matter knowledge (Tucker, 1999). Whether it is their first or second language, quality teachers must be able to understand, speak, and proficiently use the language of instruction. My gains in confidence, success, and motivation surrounding her French abilities began well after high school graduation.

My experiences in secondary school were with, often at no fault of their own, unmotivated or uneducated French instructors. During the first year of my Bachelor of Education degree, I registered for a weekend course with two middle-aged, male French professors. These men were among the most energetic, lively, determined teachers I had encountered, and they soon surpassed my beginning French teachers in merit. They were passionate about the language and what they taught. I began to enjoy the challenge of learning French as never before; I became motivated to learn.

Now, five short years later, I am an entertaining and tenacious Basic French teacher who holds very high expectations for each of my students. Following my first teaching year, a returning student approached me. The student shared that during the summer he traveled to Montreal with his family. He was shocked, not only by the amount of French he could comprehend in conversations with Québécois, but by his ability to actually converse in French!

The student thanked me profusely, but I ensured him that he alone was responsible for his own successes. I had simply motivated the student to learn.

In addition to other measures in which bilinguals' lives are enriched by speaking French and English, developing French-speaking individuals who are aware of the French culture fosters lifelong investments in these students' education and self-esteem. The number of bilinguals in Canada has consistently increased during the past 60 years, with the exception of the decade prior to the 2011 census (Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 6). We need consistent increases in this demographic while ensuring positive French language learning experiences for Anglophones through the development of students' confidence, success, and motivation; and high quality teachers in every French classroom.

## Conclusion

As a bilingual, the boundaries of my life are infinitely more extensive. I strongly believe in the social and cultural benefits of speaking more than one language. Researchers have proved repeatedly that being bilingual is more rewarding than being monolingual (Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Flores & Soto, 2012; Tucker, 1999), because of superior communication skills (Roitman, 2013), enhanced executive functions (Luo et al., 2012), a delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease (Craik et al., 2010), and contributions to the Canadian economy (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013). Encouraging youth, our future, to sustain their bilingualism or become bilingual, fosters lifelong investment in these students.

While it is evident that there are dramatic benefits to speaking more than one language (Roitman, 2013), such as an enhanced thinking process (Luo et al., 2012), much remains unsolved surrounding language learning. Intriguing questions arise: How exactly does bilingualism change the brain, and which aspects of these changes protect the onset of Alzheimer's disease? Is being trilingual further advantageous? Do the languages spoken reveal greater benefits depending on their similarity (such as Italian and Spanish) or dissimilarity (such as English and Japanese)? Does it suffice to speak two languages from the teenage years onward, or must one be bilingual from infancy to experience the most benefits? Many questions remain for future studies.

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### **About the Author**

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