

The benefits of speaking different languages | Phyllisienne Vassallo Gauci

A language is an important communication tool and speaking different languages allows us to be overall better communicators with the ability to understand and appreciate different cultures

1 September 2019, 9:08am

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Changing educational and labour market demands as well as growing mobility between countries all favour citizens who are able to speak two or more languages. But the advantages of speaking foreign languages go well beyond linguistic knowledge and a number of substantial cognitive, social, personal, and professional benefits are well documented.

To start with, children and adults who speak two or more different languages develop a markedly better language proficiency in, sensitivity to, and understanding of their own mother tongue. Learning one or more foreign languages helps in developing a keener awareness and sharper perception of language. This enhances our understanding of how our first language works and our ability to use language.

Research shows that plurilingual individuals also exhibit greater cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and thinking skills. Attention divisibility is, in fact, just one of numerous cognitive abilities which are developed to a greater extent in people who speak many languages.

Speaking two or more languages helps to better control executive processes carried out by the brain, which are generally responsible for activities such as problem solving, multi-level thinking, staying focused and multi-tasking. Learning languages has similar effects on the brain as physical exercises on the human body, making it healthier and able to regenerate faster. Maintaining high brain activity through switching between languages or just learning them can delay aging symptoms for this organ. The “workout” a bilingual brain receives throughout its life may also help delay the onset of diseases such as Dementia and Alzheimer.

A language is an important communication tool and speaking different languages allows us to be overall better communicators with the ability to understand and appreciate different cultures and people from different countries. Learning a new language brings with it a revelation of a new culture which includes history, cuisine and traditions. People who speak and understand different languages expand their personal horizons through a significant means of access to different cultural manifestations. They see their own culture from a new perspective which is not necessarily available to those who speak only one language, enabling the comparison, contrast, and understanding of different cultures.

Finally, people with more languages in their portfolio have increased job opportunities and are more competitive. In a globalised world, languages are crucial for mobility and employability.

Knowledge of foreign languages enables a person to be more competitive whichever the career path chosen. A person with the ability to speak two or more languages is more appealing to local and global companies because such a candidate can broaden the company’s reach to different countries and can build and maintain good relationships with foreign partners and clients.