Deeper empathy is only one benefit of being multilingual

University Communications
February 2024

The ability to communicate in multiple languages transcends the mere exchange of words – it enables exploration of diverse cultures, perspectives and histories. The benefits of being bilingual or multilingual are comprehensive, touching every aspect of human life from the way our brains function to the way we interact with the world.

To promote cultural diversity and multilingualism, International Mother Language Day is observed annually on Feb. 21 to encourage individuals learn and use multiple languages and adopt multilingual education.

Multilingual individuals enjoy a richer cultural understanding and an expanded world view, says Janet Nicol, a linguistics professor at the University of Arizona.

Juggling two languages, she adds, has been shown to enhance cognitive abilities and executive control, higher-order abilities necessary for achieving a goal, understanding complex concepts and maintaining focus or attention.

"Multilingualism makes people more empathetic, making them understand what it might be like to live in a particular culture," Nicol said.

It could also make individuals more marketable when it comes to jobs, giving them an advantage in industries such as international travel and positions that require being able to speak multiple languages, according to Nicol.

It also turns out that multilingualism has cognitive benefits. People who are bilingual or multilingual from birth have to negotiate between two or multiple languages, Nicol said.

"It's hard to do that. If you're bilingual, you have to choose between the two perfectly good ways to express what you intend to convey and you need to constantly monitor your audience and the languages that they speak," Nicol said.

Some individuals move back and forth between two languages, called code-switching, a concept in linguistics. According to a 2016 study, among many others, code-switching is a sophisticated cognitive strategy and not a sign of language deficiency.

Developing this capacity to choose to speak one language and suppress the other exercises the executive control system, Nicol said. Due to years of experience suppressing a language that is not in play, bilinguals are better than monolinguals at being able to ignore task-irrelevant stimuli in the environment.

A study published in 2014 found that bilingual individuals develop dementia 4.5 years later than those who are monolingual. However, less is known if these positive cognition-related consequences apply to people who learn a new language in their adulthood, Nicol said.

"It doesn't hurt to learn another language at any age. It always opens up the possibilities to get exposed to a new culture," Nicol said.

In a university setting, interaction between monolingual and bilingual or multilingual students creates an enriching atmosphere, Nicol said, adding that international students bring a perspective that's important to growth and education of the student community.

A 20-year longitudinal study conducted at Duke University showed that American classmates who interacted with international students had their self-confidence, leadership qualities and quantitative skills enhanced in addition to gaining the opportunity to learn foreign cultures.

At the University, there are more than 3,400 international students representing more than 100 countries, said Noelle Sallaz, associate director for International Student Services.

"Our job is to make sure that we're providing international students with the right support, resources and paperwork to be able to come to the University of Arizona," Sallaz said.

Many people who work in her office speak different languages and have lived or worked in different countries.

"Our advisers speak multiple languages, and this has been very useful when we communicate complex immigration knowledge to students," Sallaz said.

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