



Multilingualism:

The Benefits on The Brain and The Economy



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“For children, advanced knowledge of two languages has been shown to result in specific brain benefits, like enhanced creativity and flexibility, increased test scores, and improved literacy skills, as well as social advantages such as greater cross-cultural understanding, adaptability, and increased competitiveness on the job market down the line.” (King and Mackey 3)

Throughout the world there are thousands of languages, some common and others nearly unheard of. Every country has its own policies about languages, which ones to teach and which not to. Some countries are monolingual and some are multilingual. Multilingual meaning knowing and having the capability to speak or understand more than one language and monolingual understanding just one. The U.S teaches some multilingualism throughout the country, mostly throughout high schools. Compared with most other countries however, the U.S has a small system for multilingual learning.

There is currently an inequality of languages, and English is the primary language being taught and spoken. While English is not the national language for the U.S it is easily the most spoken language. Only 18 percent of Americans speak another language besides English, which is a very small number (Foreign Language Learning Statistics). There are many benefits of speaking more than one language and many negative myths that are not in fact true. Children react positively to multilingual environments. Because of this the U.S should make more of an effort to teach multilingualism to children in schools at an early age.

A Brief History of Multilingualism In the United States

Throughout the history of the United States there have been times of low tolerance of multilingualism and times of high tolerance of multilingualism. While this country was first being settled by the English, linguistic diversity was common. Multilingualism was not an uncommon occurrence for those living in the United States. From the 18th century up until World War One, multilingualism and the presence of other languages was common and even encouraged. During this

large period of time German-English schools were set up in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Minnesota, Dakota and Wisconsin. Multilingualism like this was accepted and school days were often split into halves: One half taught in English and the other taught in German (Ovando, Carlos).

After World War One, the United States started getting more cautious about what languages were being spoken. They started trying to minimize the number of immigrants that were being allowed in the U.S. English was considered the loyal language to speak in the U.S and other languages were seen as a possible threat. Because those speaking them were seen as a possible threat.

As the United States entered the second war a realization was made. Multilingualism would be beneficial for the country. Language as well as many other skills were an essential part for the U.S at this time. Being involved in a world war, they needed to be able to speak their enemy's languages for diplomatic and defensive reasons. When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit the U.S. The U.S realized how important it was to speak a variety of languages. Sputnik received and broadcasted radio signals, which few in the U.S could understand. The U.S started integrating more multilingualism into the system. The National Defense Education Act encouraged foreign language learning in schools for monolingual children. The main purpose of teaching languages was for military and economic reasons. Other cultures were still not widely accepted at this point. This slowly started to change. In the 1960s the Civil Rights Act was being fought. Immigration was more accepted and there was more demographic diversity in the U.S. Languages as well as culture were spreading through the U.S more and more. (Ovando, Carlos).

While multilingual education was starting to look more prominent in the U.S the battle was not won. To this day the battle of multilingualism has not ended. It is still questioned whether or not it is important for people to speak more than just English. As of now there is no efficient system of multilingual education put into place in the U.S.

Common Myths and Misconceptions

Multilingualism is questioned and debated greatly. People wonder if it does more harm than good, and whether it's worth it to be multilingual. It's debated whether children can handle more than one language at a young age. Linguistic professors at Georgetown University, Kendall King and Alison Mackey believe that children can handle a multilingual environment. They state, "Millions of children grow up learning three or more languages and have been doing so for hundreds of year, with no ill effects" (King and Mackey 31). Despite many beliefs research has shown that there aren't any ill effects from teaching a child multilingually.

One of the most common myths is that children can't handle more than one language. If they are taught more than one language at a young age, they will mix and scramble the languages together. They will get confused and they won't be able to tell the difference between the two and so they will speak a mixed language. That is, a mix of the languages they are learning. King and Mackey also say that "results of decades of carefully conducted research point to the fact that young children distinguish early on between their two languages." (King and Mackey 27). It is also stated that children who are exposed to multiple languages from birth view them as means of communication (King and Mackey 60).

Those that give into the idea of multilingual learning often only see bilingual learning as beneficial. The thought is that a child may be able to handle two languages, but not more than that. However, as long as the child has enough attention with that language they will be able to learn many more than two languages. If all the languages are showing up equally in their everyday life, the child will be able to tell the difference between them and see all of them as natural means of communication. That is, if all the languages are being spoken an equal amount with the child they will realize the differences between them and note them as means of communication (Myths; Multilingual Children's Association).

Another misconception about multilingual learning is that one language should be thoroughly

learned first. After that, more can be learned, but only then. Studies have shown otherwise. Learning multiple languages simultaneously is much easier for the child (Myths; Multilingual Children's Association). It is easier to introduce new languages into a child's brain when they are younger and their brain hasn't become very developed yet. UCLA biophysicist Michael Phelps says that our brains are most capable of gathering new information when we are young. He says, "For example, foreign-language instruction is often deferred until high school, despite the fact that youngsters can learn to speak like natives -- that is, to think in the language without having to translate -- whereas teenagers or adults usually cannot. When small children learn a new language he said, the ability to use that language is wired in the brain" (Nadia, Steve).

So there are many people with the impression that multilingualism is not beneficial and is difficult to teach. The common myths are that children can't handle more than one language, two languages may be a possibility but no more than that, and languages have to be learned individually instead of simultaneously. It has been proven that most of these negative conceptions about multilingual learning are in fact false, but what are the benefits of knowing more than one language? There are several.

Reasons To Be Multilingual

In an article from Time Science & Space the author states that multilingualism is very beneficial to the brain. He says, "New studies are showing that a multilingual brain is nimbler, quicker, better able to deal with ambiguities, resolve conflicts and even resist Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia longer". The easiest way to understand this is that being multilingual exercises your brain. Learning languages works and strengthens your brain. The more you learn, the stronger it becomes and the less likely it will be to deteriorate from things like Alzheimer's disease. It is like a muscle, the more you use it and exercise it the better it works. If someone sits on the couch all day and does not exercise, their muscles do not work as well. However, if they exercise their muscles they will be in better

condition. Language is one of the things that exercises the brain. So the more languages being learned, the better condition your brain will be in (Kluger, Jeffrey).

Besides individual benefits of being multilingual there are also economic advantages. As with World War II it is still important for our country to have multilingual speakers, for military reasons. We need to have translators to be able to interpret our enemies and allies of combat for our protection as well as economic benefits (Peterson, Thane). Representative Judy Chu stresses the importance of multilingualism in our economy. “Today, the lack of a second language doesn’t just isolate people. It makes them less competitive” (Chu, Judy). Knowing more than one languages helps in the business world. While English is probably the most widely spoken language throughout the world, it gives a very distinct advantage in the business world to know more than one language.

Armin Hopp from Realbusiness agrees “Today’s global labour market makes the integration of multilingual and multicultural workers crucial for sustainable business growth” (Hopp, Armin). Hopp also says that while “English retains its leading role as the world’s first business language, ensuring staff can communicate in other languages gives you a significant competitive advantage”. A study showed that a large proportion of companies in Europe lose business every year as a result of weak language and communication skills. (Hopp, Armin).

While Europe is not as multilingually diverse as other continents like Africa, it is still very present. In the past three decades most countries have been making an effort to teach other languages at an earlier age. An article released from Europa.eu states that European countries now teach foreign language in primary education. Some even earlier than this. “Several countries include at least one foreign language from the first or second year of compulsory primary education (Italy, Luxembourg, Austria, France, Norway, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Estonia, Finland and Sweden)” Other countries like Germany and Spain teach a foreign language to children when they are around three years old. “In Asia and Europe, the question is not whether you speak another language – it’s how many” (Chu, Judy). English is the most common foreign language taught throughout Europe. English is taught to about 90

percent of all pupils across the countries of Europe (Brussels).

If Armin Hopp speaks the truth in his article from Realbusiness, then the U.S must lose a lot of money each year from even poorer language and communication skills throughout businesses. Throughout the U.S roughly 10 percent of native-born people speak another language besides English. This is partly due to the fact that from 1997 the number of private and public elementary schools that teach foreign language courses has decreased from 31 percent to 25 percent. Middle schools have dropped even more. They went from 75 percent to 58 percent. On the bright side high schools have remained at around 91 percent. All of these statistics are considerably low compared to those of Europe. Also the fact that 91 percent of high schools in the U.S teach foreign languages is of little benefit when compared to the fact that most elementary and many middle schools do not have foreign language programs. The reason being, that as stated earlier, we learn languages best at an early age, preferably at the same time that one starts to learn his/her native language(s).

How The U.S Can Change

As of now the U.S has the largest, most technologically advanced economy throughout the whole world (Central Intelligence Agency). However, with competition from other fast growing economies like that of China, the U.S is going to have to make some changes in order to stay on top. As stated previously multilingual citizens greatly boosts an economy. Multilingual citizens are something that the U.S lacks and is in great need of. The U.S is only bordered by two countries; Canada and Mexico. On the other side of the spectrum, countries in Europe are bordered by many other countries which contain citizens who speak a different language. For this reason, it is somewhat mandatory for European countries to have proactive multilingual policies.

It's been shown that the U.S isn't 'forced' to be very multilingual because it is such a big country and has very few countries bordering it. Citizens of the U.S are able to get by with only knowing

English. This does not however, mean that this the way it should be. As various researchers and representatives have said, the U.S economy would increase with increased language learning programs. The U.S has many allies throughout the world and diplomatic relations with many other countries. These numbers would flourish as languages being taught in the U.S grew. The U.S could build stronger connections with allying countries, form new alliances with countries that are not already allied to the U.S, and manage trade with a large variety of other countries.

The easiest way for the U.S to start becoming more multilingual is to help young children learn because they will pick it up the fastest. Then their children will learn and their children's children and so on. There are many ways the U.S can go about making these changes and creating environments where multilingual learning is not only accepted but encouraged. The ideal environment for a child to learn is at home. "Second language learning works best when it is integrated into all of our busy everyday routines and many activities." (King and Mackey 100) It is best for a child to learn additional languages like they would their first. From their parents, at home, and hearing it in everyday life. Since it is obviously very unrealistic for most children to learn like this due to busy schedules of their parents and home life, there is an alternative. Sufficient language programs at schools would act as this alternative.

Multilingual programs should be set into place in a child's life as soon as they start school. Since young children's brains are susceptible to picking up new things like languages, it is best to start them off as early as possible. "For majority language families, use of the second language can (and in optimal circumstances, should) begin in the first months of infancy" (King and Mackey 100)

As previously stated roughly 25 percent of elementary schools and 58 percent of middle schools have a program for any foreign language program in the U.S, and as compared to other countries, this is below standards. In European countries such as Spain, Italy, Austria, and Greece, nine out of ten children study English in primary school. These children are speaking their native languages at this point as well as English and possibly languages such as German and French which are commonly

spoken in many countries throughout Europe. Once in primary school 92.7% of European students study English as a foreign language. Also once in primary school 23.9% of students study German and 23.2% study French (Foreign Language Learning Statistics). So overall the number of multilingual student in Europe is much greater than in the United States.

Languages should also be placed more equally in education. That is, classes shouldn't only be taught in one language. There is in fact a very good example of this happening in the U.S. The state of Utah is experimenting with multilingualism throughout several of its schools. An article about multilingualism brings this case up saying, "20% of all public schools offer K-12 dual-language instruction, with students taking half their classes every day in English and half in either Spanish, French, Mandarin or Portuguese" (Kluger, Jeffrey). Jeffery Kluger, the author of the article states that the U.S has finally started to catch up with other countries in its lack of multilingual learning. In cases like this, instead of having a language class that lasts around 50 minutes, there is a whole half of the day dedicated to language. Other subjects like math and science are still being learned during this period, but instead of only being taught in English they are also taught in another language. While it could be hard to find teachers that know these subjects and can speak another language, it is possible. The U.S needs to make more of an effort into preparing teachers and professors for this kind of classroom learning.

The U.S tends to brag about how powerful of a country it is. At least it seems to be a general thought that we are economically a very sound country, and as noted before we are the most technologically advanced country throughout the world. With this being said it could be easy to throw out further ideas to increase our economy because we are already doing so well. However, as claimed previously the U.S is very far behind in the world of multilingualism and multilingual teaching. For such a large economically advanced country there are some serious things lacking that could be changed.

As said before, it's almost mandatory for many other countries to have such multilingual diversity

because of geographical factors. That does not however give an excuse for the U.S to stray away from a multilingual education system. The benefits outweigh the negatives in this matter by a long shot, both for individuals and for the country as a whole. Opportunities for a proper multilingual environment should be provided, if not by parents then by the government. A proper environment being that which languages have more equality and are not constantly prioritized over one another in school, the business world, and social world. An environment that allows learning of multiple languages to commence at a young age for children. Because the U.S is doing so well on most other aspects of the economy when compared to other countries, it could probably afford to fund multilingual programs.

This however is not something that can happen over night. Or in a year or two for that matter. Programs can be put into place but the U.S's population will not be fully multilingual for a few generations to come. This gives urgency to this matter. Since multilingualism is so important for the business world, and government, and is so beneficial for individuals, the U.S better step into action before it loses more money off of this. If the U.S wishes to stay on top as an economically advanced country, steps must be taken to insure this. Steps that can start in the homes of parents but that will also hopefully start in the settings of public and private schools as well.

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