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# The benefits of learning additional languages

## *Research summary*

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Summary developed by Emily VanderKamp based on a report by:  
**Marianne Nikolov, Professor Emerita, University of Pécs and Shelagh Rixon,  
Retired Associate Professor, Warwick University**

Study managed on behalf of the IB Research department by Heike Schröder

## Background

This literature review synthesizes research on the benefits of additional language learning in K–12 education and beyond. It examines how these benefits are framed in educational policy and theory, with particular attention to those substantiated by empirical research. This review explores the extent to which the anticipated benefits of language learning are supported by research evidence. The study also identifies the conditions necessary for these benefits to emerge and highlights key lessons drawn from the evidence.

## Research design

To conduct the literature review, the researchers examined in detail 620 texts from applied linguistics, psychology, and education, ultimately synthesizing 314 sources:

- 114 reviews (systematic, scoping, critical and narrative),
- 21 meta-analyses
- 82 empirical studies
- 97 other sources (theories, key terms and surveys).

Educational documents were also reviewed to identify the benefits that policymakers and advisors, nationally and internationally, expect or aim to achieve through additional language learning.

## Expected benefits

### What benefits are specified as goals and desirable outcomes in educational documents?

Some of the expected benefits of additional language learning based on educational and policy documents include the following.

#### Expected benefits at the individual level

- Improved cognitive abilities, including problem-solving and brain health
- Increased aptitude for learning new languages
- Greater empathy, appreciation of diversity and reduced prejudice
- Enhanced well-being through access to education in the language of instruction
- Expanded international mobility for study and work, along with new career opportunities and greater cultural capital

#### Expected benefits at the societal level

- Enhanced social justice and social cohesion
- Improved integration of migrants into their new communities
- Stronger international relations through intercultural understanding
- National economic benefits supported by global business relations

## What benefits do theories of learning and using additional languages suggest?

While theories acknowledge certain benefits beyond competence in an additional language, they primarily focus on measurable outcomes in the target language. Less attention is given to how individuals benefit from learning and using their full language repertoires. Most theories emphasize that language development is a lifelong process; that multilingualism is more common globally than monolingualism; and that individual characteristics and contextual variables impact the learning process and outcomes. Life trajectories also play a role, whether individuals learn languages within supportive educational environments or under pressure to adapt and survive, which can hinder progress. Two domains are rarely conceptualized in theory as measurable: how language learning contributes to well-being, and the level of knowledge and skills learners gain by learning content in an additional language. Finally, theories and empirical studies often centre on English as the lingua franca, while less commonly learned languages receive less attention.

## Findings

### Which of the benefits are supported by evidence in empirical studies?

#### Cognitive findings

Most studies support slight cognitive advantages for bilinguals, especially for children, though limited detail in many studies makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about program types or age groups. Some cognitive benefits associated with knowing and using additional languages **may** include:

- ongoing cognitive improvement over time
- delayed mental decline in older age
- enhanced executive function
- improved language-learning aptitude—a flexible set of skills that can develop with experience and may support the efficient learning of new languages and other skills
- a bidirectional effect of language learning and use—practice strengthens plurilingual individuals' abilities to learn and use their full language repertoires.

#### Educational findings

When it comes to language-learning strategies, there is no single approach that works for everyone. School-age children use different strategies for many reasons, including current proficiency levels. As children grow, their use of strategies tends to develop in a similar way to metacognition, but some studies suggest that school experiences can influence which strategies they use and how quickly they develop them. School-age learners may need consistent reminding and practice to use strategies to the best effect. Students in schools that promote metacognition and reflective learning across the curriculum are well positioned to develop self-regulation skills that extend beyond language learning and support overall academic success.

While individual strategies and supportive school environments play a key role in language learning, broader instructional models—such as content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and English as the medium of instruction (EMI)—also aim to enhance learning outcomes by combining language and content instruction. However, few publications document the extent to which CLIL and EMI programs benefit learners in content subjects. Most researchers focus on how students improve in the new language but pay less attention to how well they learn the other school subjects taught in that language.

Meta-analyses of empirical studies conducted over two decades generally show no or modest benefits in both domains. Additionally, some authors expressed concerns that CLIL and EMI programs tend to serve the needs of socio-economic elites rather than those of all students.

Students' knowledge and skills in their chosen academic subjects, along with their individual learner characteristics, help explain why some succeed while others face challenges. Clearly, proficiency in an additional language is just one of many factors influencing students' academic trajectories and success.

### Conative and affective findings

Conative<sup>1</sup> and affective<sup>2</sup> characteristics overlap, interact and evolve simultaneously. They are also dynamic and are influenced by contextual factors and lived experiences—a finding that can be generalized across all ages and language backgrounds. Positive experiences with additional language learning boost individuals' grit, growth mindset, self-efficacy and willingness to seek further practice opportunities. This often leads to enhanced language development, improved self-perception and overall well-being, demonstrating the cycle of success leading to further success despite minor setbacks. Conversely, challenges can undermine learners' confidence in their positive characteristics, increasing demotivation, anxiety and negative beliefs about their goals and abilities.

These findings offer insights into how the advantages in learner-related factors could and should be enhanced to make sure that all learners and users of additional languages can experience success. It is up to teachers and other stakeholders to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to enjoy the advantages of additional learning programs.

### Socio-economic and cultural findings

Because most studies on socio-economic benefits were large-scale and some used representative samples, their findings can be generalized as evidence-based benefits of knowing additional languages. There are clear advantages for plurilingual individuals in the job market, with higher proficiency in multiple languages correlating with better employment opportunities. However, outcomes vary between individuals born in the country and those who immigrated. The economic benefits, ranging from 10% to 20%, meaningfully contribute to the well-being of individuals, communities and societies. Plurilingualism enhances career prospects by helping individuals access opportunities aligned with their skills, knowledge and goals.

The researchers also examined studies to identify how learning and using additional languages can help people develop intercultural competence. These findings were less clear, largely due to varying definitions of "intercultural competence" and the diverse research methods used, which makes it difficult to reach consistent conclusions.

1 Conative characteristics describe how learners motivate themselves, pursue goals, persist and take initiative.

2 Affective characteristics describe how learners feel about learning, engage with others and respond emotionally to tasks and learning environments.

## What are the necessary conditions allowing these benefits to emerge?

Many desired outcomes of additional language learning were observed at the individual level. These include plurilingual advantages in cognitive and educational domains across all age groups, from children to older adults. To support these benefits, programs need to be carefully designed, focused and implemented well.

Individuals' conative and affective characteristics are shaped by their day-to-day learning experiences. The main takeaway is clear: good teaching should give students choice and control in their learning; offer helpful feedback to build their skills; and make sure they feel supported by teachers, classmates, and the wider community. While only a few studies focused on teachers, it is widely recognized that they play a key role in additional language learning.

The results for programs teaching subjects in the language of instruction (such as CLIL) were disappointing. These programs were expected to

show the clearest benefits by helping students learn both the language and the subject at the same time. However, it is likely that the necessary conditions for implementing innovative programs were not met, and there is not enough information to fully understand what those conditions should be.

## What lessons can be learned from the evidence?

Research designs in empirical studies varied significantly. Various instruments were used, with very few longitudinal studies involving large groups of participants. Additionally, few studies used data triangulation.

Future studies should focus on teaching quality, support the development of disadvantaged learners' cognitive and metacognitive skills, include cost-benefit analyses, engage teachers as both designers and participants, and use data triangulation to ensure more valid results.

## Conclusion

While CLIL is widely promoted, the evidence shows little to no added value for learners' additional language development or subject knowledge, with observed benefits often attributable to learner selection rather than program design. Most studies support slight cognitive advantages for bilinguals, such as improved executive function, delayed cognitive decline and enhanced language-learning aptitude, though limited detail in many studies makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about program types or age groups. Based on the research, plurilingual individuals tend to have a clear economic advantage in the job market, with added value ranging from 10% to 20%, although outcomes vary between individuals born in the country and those who immigrated.

A copy of the full report is available at: <http://www.ibo.org/en/research/>.

For more information on this study or other IB research, please email [research@ibo.org](mailto:research@ibo.org).

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