



Bilingual Job Feature

## Bilingualism Is Becoming a Necessity, Not a Privilege

By Douglas May

**With the booming population in the US and other countries of the world, bilingualism is becoming a topic attracting considerable attention. Many bilingual children around the globe speak languages like German, Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic. The majority of bilinguals in the US speak Spanish.**



Researchers have differing opinions about the benefits of bilingualism, and some have argued that learning two languages simultaneously can cause confusion and actually impede a child's development.

Others, however, point to the practicality of enabling people to communicate with larger and more diverse groups of individuals from other corners of the globe. Bilingualism also is believed by many to enhance cognitive flexibility in children as it makes them aware that ideas can be expressed in many different ways.

Bilingual education for children has become a debatable issue, and some people in the US see it as a form of "anti-Americanism." These people see bilingual education as a factor for hindering children from learning English, thereby seeing no need for native US children to learn second languages.

Early studies citing bilingualism as being bad for children were discounted as they failed to take into account socioeconomic differences and did not test children in their native languages. Since the 1960s, however, research has shown bilingualism to be an asset, not a detriment, to children's development. Obtaining second-language skills enriches intellectual growth and aids in the development of language-cognitive skills. Learning additional languages also improves interpersonal and intercultural communication abilities, both of which are important in today's diverse US population and increasingly interconnected world.

One learner of languages states, "Emigrating from Kashmir, India, in 1996, I was personally adept at several native languages in addition to the English I learned in school. From Kashmiri to Urdu, Hindi, and Arabic, there was never any confusion growing up with the panoply of languages. In fact, I found the bilingual/bicultural setting particularly enriching both academically and personally. This experience carried over to the United States as the English I had learned in India allowed me to assimilate the foreign culture and form interpersonal and intercultural competence. Furthermore, my communication skills and cultural competency will only expand the career choices available to me."

Studies on critical periods for language development show that children who learn a second language at one to three years of age demonstrate the normal pattern of greater left-hemisphere activity in a test of grammatical knowledge. Those who acquired the language later show increased right-hemispheric activity, so localization is likelier when you learn the language earlier. Bilingual education works best at an early age. Adults simply do not perceive most differences in speech sounds that are not important in their native languages, which partly explains the difficulties most adults have when attempting to learn a second language.

Bilingual education improves societal relations as it prepares people to participate productively in both social and professional domains. As the Latino population of this country explodes, it is becoming more essential for people in the US to have bilingual skills. Bilingualism is a key component for the advancement of the future of this country. Bilingualism should be viewed as a necessary part of education, and it will only serve to enrich the lives of all citizens of this country.

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