**The benefits of working in another language**

**Working in another language can be awkward and challenging, but it has a surprising number of positive side effects.**

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I recently spent four months working at the BBC in London, and English always sounded far smarter in my head than when it came out of my mouth. I often forgot words, made grammatical slips, and missed the usual precision of my native Spanish. It felt like trying to eat soup with a fork. As I write this, I have a dictionary open in front of me because I have learned to mistrust my ideas about what some words mean.

But there is a silver lining for those who are working in languages other than their native one. Research [**has recently shown**](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bilingualism-language-and-cognition/article/languages-flex-cultural-thinking/3026230AFC5B62364128A5D2E633D244) that people who can speak a foreign language are likely to be more analytical. Other studies have suggested that people who are bilingual make decisions in different ways from those with one language.

*It felt like trying to eat soup with a fork*

**Emotional distance**

According to research by Albert Costa, a research professor of psychology at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain, [**when people take reasoning tests in a non-native language**](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S001002771300228X), they tend to make fewer mistakes than people doing the same tests in their native language.

“In a foreign language, people seem to take more psychological distance when assessing risks,” says Costa. “They have a lesser emotional impact and engage in a more analytical mind process.”

Costa and his team speculate that this “foreign language effect”, as they call it, is tied to the emotional distance some people feel when speaking a foreign language. The causes are not clear, but it might have to do with the contexts in which you use it. For instance, “if you use it with friends, in relevant situations, you will have a greater emotional engagement with it”, Costa says.

It could also be that if you learn this second language at a very early age, you experience greater “emotional engagement”, he says. Or is it simply that your brain has to work harder while you speak a foreign language?

According to psychologist Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize winner for economics in 2002, in his book Thinking Fast and Slow, cognitive strain makes people more analytical. So the foreign language effect might be explained because performing tasks in a foreign language requires more taxing thought processes.

But Costa claims that, when there is no emotion involved in a particular decision, the foreign language effect seems to disappear. “It will only happen if the context in which you are making the decision triggers an emotional response in you,” he says.

Other psychologists are finding that speaking a foreign language leads to differences in the way people think and react. Ceri Ellis, a psychology researcher at the University of Manchester, says that people can be more objective in a foreign language, as they are better at deflecting false criticism about their own culture when it is expressed in a foreign language.

“The farther removed the second language is from your mother tongue, the bigger the effect,” says Ellis in an interview.

So, my own awkwardness when working in English was perhaps compensated by a more accurate way of thinking. This small perk, of course, would have vanished if I developed a tighter and more emotional relationship with the language.

So perhaps I was lucky to not fall in love during my time in the UK.

**A better negotiator**

But what does it mean to be more analytical? Suppose that 600,000 people have a disease and will die if they are not treated. You are presented with two options: either give them a drug that kills 400,000 of them, or a second drug that has a 33.3% chance of saving all the 600,000, but a 66.6% chance of saving no-one. What do you do?

If you chose the drug that would kill 400,000 of the patients, it was the right call – it is the safest scenario. But it is also [**the option that most people would choose to avoid**](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364661306003317), because it is presented in a disturbing way.

Curiously, when people are presented with the same scenario but told instead that they will save 200,000 people, most of them choose it. The mathematics is the same, but the framing of the question is different and affects how people answer.

*While at first glance, negotiating in a language other than your mother tongue might seem a disadvantage, it could also make you the most cool-headed person in the room*

People who make the right call in this sort of psychological experiment are often the minority, and they are considered to have a more analytic mindset since they are not prone to falling into the trap of biases or shortcuts that lead to mistakes in reasoning. In a business context, being able to avoid reasoning pitfalls could be extremely beneficial if you are making critical decisions.

**The upper hand**

Also, having some distance on a situation can be really helpful. It can also make emotionally draining situations more bearable. This could be particularly helpful during high-stakes negotiations.

While at first glance, negotiating in a language other than your mother tongue might seem a disadvantage, it could also make you the most cool-headed person in the room.

“Many people feel insulted when they are negotiating,” says Costa. “If we could have a more relaxed approach, things would be better. Speaking a foreign language allows you to buy time in a negotiation. You can act like you have not understood for thinking your answer.”

*Speaking a foreign language allows you to buy time in a negotiation, you can act like you have not understood for thinking your answer - Albert Costa*

This is exactly the sort of trick expert international negotiators such as diplomats and business people often employ. Not being a very fluent speaker [**can also be useful as a strategy to ‘sell yourself short’**](https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2016/04/07/of-two-minds) and appear as less smart than you really are. This is a move that might make your opponent fail to cover all their bases and give you an unexpected advantage.

So, next time you know you need to have a difficult discussion with a colleague, it might be better to do it in a foreign language.

Some research even suggests that [**aggressive words ‘hurt’ less**](https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/mar/27/bad-language-why-being-bilingual-makes-swearing-easier) when they are not heard in your native tongue. So whatever is said, it could be less likely to permanently strain a working relationship, which could prove a crucial advantage if you still have to see and talk to the other person at work every day.

While in theory speaking a foreign language seems to help people to assess situations more objectively, in real life it is complicated. Ellis’s research shows it seems to protect people from false — and probably ill-meaning — reproach. But she also found that pride can also serve to undo this effect. She warns that this might appear in “a workplace with a lot of intergroup conflicts", meaning that people are likely to be blind to valid criticism when it comes from someone they perceive as ‘a foe’.

There is no research so far that could confirm this idea, but anyone who has had to work with a rival team might know what Ellis is talking about. The foreign language effect may be not enough to counter team pride.

**Real life**

Personally, I don’t remember being more rational during my time working in London. It could be my English was good enough to cancel the effect, or I simply didn’t notice. But many other people who work in a foreign language agreed with the study when I told them about it.

Natalia Vivas, a Colombian entrepreneur and UX consultant who now lives in London, recalls how easy it was to broker a more favourable contract with a Swedish client in English. “I didn’t fear telling him ‘this is what it costs’,” she says.

But the second language effect might not be the only reason that she was able to be blunt with her client. As foreigners, they were unlikely to meet again too.

“With local clients in Spanish, and particularly with big ones, the negotiation was a lot slower, and I felt a lot more insecure,” she explains.

For some, their limited vocabulary in a foreign language may be the reason for being succinct and rational.

"It is easier to explain my team what I want from them than to express them the feelings I associate with what I want", says Maria Paz Castaneda, a Colombian engineer who works in an oil refinery in Rotterdam, Netherlands. "In Spanish, I can come up with five ways of saying one thing, but in Dutch, I only can think of one."

There is also the challenge of understanding a different culture and cracking politeness codes.

“I felt anxious about the way people write their emails, how do they greet and say goodbye,”  Vivas says about his current London job. Again, being succinct is a smart way of not taking a lot of risks.

The combined effect of all that is that many foreign-language workers have to use their brains a lot more than their native-speaker peers. As she says, "in English, I have to take my time to think.”

Being bilingual and working in a non-native language makes you a different worker, not necessarily a worse or better one. If your job needs you to be a quick-witted and accurate communicator, another language most likely makes thing more difficult. But if your work calls for a slow, rational and detached mind, using a foreign tongue gives you a small push.

Too bad that my job in London demanded both skills.