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Literature Review on the Impact of Second-Language Learning

BACKGROUND

Imagine if someone told you that you could take one step that would enable you to travel more freely, get paid more, read some of the world's best literature, perform better in school, increase your focus, and enhance your understanding of other cultures. Such claims seem almost too good to be true. The fortunate news is that second-language learning is the one step that learners can take that will lead to these and other benefits.

The purpose of the current literature review is to investigate whether and how learning a second language affects language learners. It focuses on research in the following areas: cognition, academics, personal life, society at large, economics and intercultural understanding. In addition, special attention is paid to the extent to which students with exceptionalities and additional language learners are able to acquire additional languages. Learning languages takes time and effort, and the amount of time it takes depends on a number of factors. Some of these include the learning context, learning goals and the age of the learner, to name just a few. Most often learning a second language has a positive impact on the language learner. At times, however, learning languages may pose challenges. The research presented here focuses both on the benefits and the challenges associated with learning a second language.

The current review builds on *A Review of the Literature on Second Language Learning* carried out by a team of researchers from the Language Research Centre at the University of Calgary in 2004 and revised in 2006.¹ As such, the research summarized in this review was published after 2006. In addition, the current review focuses less on how languages are taught and more on the impact of second-language learning.

1 www.acpi.ca/documents/litreview.pdf

COGNITIVE IMPACT

- Second-language learning in a school context has a positive impact on the development of general cognitive skills of learners.
- Learning a second language is helpful to learners' language development, which in turn may help learners to learn other languages more quickly.
- Speaking more than one language might enhance bilinguals' focus and ability to ignore irrelevant information.
- Bilinguals outperform monolinguals on many cognitive tasks including solving problems, multitasking, remembering longer lists of information and switching between tasks.
- Speaking more than one language helps to compensate for cognitive disadvantages that result from aging, epilepsy and low socioeconomic status.

ACADEMIC IMPACT

- Children who learn a second language show either comparable or enhanced first-language literacy.
- Second-language learners often show enhanced spelling ability as well as superior reading comprehension when they are compared to their monolingual peers.
- Children receiving second-language instruction often show higher achievement in a range of subject areas, including mathematics, science and language arts.
- Learning a second language enhances second-language learners' grammatical knowledge and awareness of speech sounds and sentence structures.

PERSONAL IMPACT

- Learning second (or multiple) languages leads to enhanced communicative abilities, including the use of verbal and nonverbal skills, perspective-taking skills and interpersonal understanding.
- Learning a second language enhances creative ability by promoting unique problem solving, flexibility and creative thinking.
- Learning a second language can contribute to increased connection to cultural identity and family history, and facilitate communication with relatives.
- Knowing a second language can act as a source of pride and self-esteem.
- Second-language learning strengthens tolerance of ambiguity and awareness of different cultural perspectives and practices.
- Study abroad and language exchange programs often lead to enhanced second-language abilities. They also motivate students to seek expanded job and travel opportunities, and they contribute to feelings of independence, maturity, patience and flexibility.

SOCIETAL IMPACT

- Second-language learners demonstrate enhanced empathy, awareness of diversity, tolerance of difference and a greater sense of social justice.
- Learning second languages encourages learners to embrace scientific, social and environmental ideas originating from other parts of the world.
- Second-language learning promotes international dialogue, collaboration and engaged global citizenship.
- Second-language learning promotes the development of cultural identities and contributes to a deeper appreciation for the transmission of culture through language.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

- Second-language learners demonstrate enhanced development of self-awareness as well as more positive attitudes and openness to other languages and their speakers and cultures.
- Second-language learners often show fewer cultural prejudices and negative stereotypes.
- Second-language learning has potential for fostering intercultural dialogue and easing antagonism between conflicting sides.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

- Employees who speak a second language often earn more than monolinguals.
- The ability to speak a second language often positively affects earnings both directly and indirectly through educational achievement, a wider range of opportunities for involvement in local and global markets, and by signalling enhanced communicative and cognitive abilities and skills to potential employers.
- Second-language skills afford individuals greater mobility in both local and international markets and allow them to serve a wider range of clientele.
- Second-language skills are often highly valued and expected by potential employers.
- Second-language skills have large-scale economic benefits, as they make businesses more competitive in the global economy and boost international trade.

STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES

- Students with various exceptionalities may benefit from learning a new language.
- Learning two languages may not necessarily cause additional delay in terms of language development for students with exceptionalities.
- The language-learning challenges faced by children with exceptionalities are often not significantly different from those of typically developing children.
- Interventions used to teach second languages to students with exceptionalities may also benefit typically developing children.

ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

- Knowing two languages is more advantageous than knowing just one language when learning additional languages.
- There are academic and cognitive benefits including the development of academic and communication skills when learning more than two languages.
- Learning more than two languages often results in a greater sense of open-mindedness and empathy.
- Learning an additional language not only positively influences language learning in general, but it also helps students to develop multicultural awareness, positive attitudes toward communicating in their non-native languages and academic proficiency.
- Even though a child's first language may not be a societal language, children can successfully learn an additional language, such as French, while learning English as a second language simultaneously.



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Second Languages and Intercultural Council

Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers



Association canadienne des professeurs de langues secondes