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Molly Bolender

Cedarville University, mbolender@cedarville.edu

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Speaking Spanish in the United States

Molly Bolender

Molly is a sophomore International Studies major. In the fall she will be studying abroad in Spain, and she is currently a member of the track and field team at Cedarville.

My first experience with the Spanish language occurred when I was in first grade. My brother and I were allowed to watch only one T.V. show after school, and “Dragon Tales” had the 3:30 time slot, so naturally that’s what we watched. One episode I remember very clearly was when the characters taught the viewers how to count to ten in Spanish. I remember thinking that counting to ten in a foreign language was so cool. During the show, I learned the numbers one through ten in Spanish, and I practiced and practiced using the numbers. I counted my steps in Spanish, the number of goldfish I ate, and so forth. Learning the numbers in Spanish at a young age got me interested in the language and helped me want to learn more words in the language.

Spanish is the fastest growing and most popular language in the United States today. With the Spanish language becoming more widespread in the past few decades, the United States is beginning to incorporate the Spanish language into everyday life. On ordinary products, more companies are starting to place a Spanish translation under the English version. Hammer, a researcher from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development states, “[Spanish] is one of the fastest-growing [languages], with the number of speakers up to 233% since 1980, when there were 11 million Spanish speakers” (1251). The projected number of Spanish speakers in America in 2020 is between 37.5 million and 41 million. The number of Spanish speakers in the U.S has no decline in sight. With the growing rate of Spanish speakers in the U.S., it is important to educate children starting at the elementary level about the

Spanish language. In addition, it is vital to educate all Americans of the Spanish language. I believe all Americans should learn Spanish because it increases cognitive skills, literary understanding, and interpersonal communication.

On the contrary, some will ask the question, “Why teach Spanish and not a different language to all Americans?” America is known as a melting pot society where so many immigrants from all over the world come to find a successful future in this great country. America has so many different cultures and communities that share the same background. For example, in Columbus, in the heart of the city, lies German Town, and in Cleveland there are several blocks of China Town consisting of authentic restaurants and shops run and owned by Chinese immigrants. Also, we cannot forget the famous Little Italy in New York City along with the numerous other diversely cultured areas in cities all over the United States. However, as previously stated, Spanish is the largest and fastest growing language in America. Learning Spanish will enhance communication with millions of Spanish speakers in America alone. Being bilingual in any language will help people with cognitive flexibility, creativity, and versatility, but teaching Spanish in schools to every student will be more beneficial for the students in the future and the American society. Schools in the United States should start teaching Spanish in kindergarten or first grade because the younger a child is learning the language, the better the student it comprehend and obtain the language.

Being able to speak two languages, no matter which languages they are, can have so many positive effects on one’s brain. Being bilingual profoundly affects the way the brain reasons and thinks. One advantage bilingualism creates is the ability to learn additional languages faster. The first language is heard and learned before birth from the womb, and the second language could be learned through school, culture, parents, relatives, etc. But, once the second language is learned, the brain is better able to absorb and understand another new language (DeLang 50-51). Bilingual brains act like a sponge, which widens the ability to obtain new vocabulary and new grammar rules. Bilinguals are able to quickly switch between tasks without becoming confused. For example when organizing colors and

shapes, they are able to categorize them with little errors (DeLang 51). Even though this example uses simple colors and shapes, it is the same when switching between two languages.

In bilingual brains, the two languages are consistently competing for “attention.” As a result, when a bilingual individual speaks, writes, or listens, his/her brain is choosing the correct word or phrase while preventing the same term from the other language. It can be considered a workout for the brain. This action helps training the brain to ignore distractions while participating in an activity. Constantly exercising the brain will make it sharper. An example of this is in the book *Devil at my Heels* by Louis Zamperini. Three men were stranded in the middle of the ocean on a raft for 47 days. One of the men, Louis Zamperini, knew they had to keep their minds sharp to keep their focus on staying alive. He remembered a college professor saying the mind was like a muscle that needed exercise or it would deteriorate because of not using it. Bilingualism helps the brain “stay in shape,” which makes it last longer. Bilinguals can solve problems with greater flexibility and versatility because of the ability to switch from different activities. Being bilingual helps the brain function more quickly and efficiently because it is constantly working with two languages.

When the brain is trained in two languages, researchers see the positive effects in the older generations. DeLang, a researcher of human linguistic diversity, states, “There is plenty of evidence to suggest that other forms of brain exercise can create ‘cognitive reserve,’ a kind of mental padding that cushions the mind against age-related decline” (51). In addition, DeLang reported a study showing that dementia showed up years later in the brains of bilingual people than the brains of monolingual patients researched in a study. A similar study was conducted on people with Alzheimer’s disease. In this study, there was a five- year delay on the bilingual brains compared to monolingual brains getting Alzheimer’s. The results were still accurate even after education and occupation were taken into consideration. Bilingualism helps the brain keep functioning healthily for longer (DeLang 51). When people start to get older, they use less and less of their brain, so bilingualism helps people maintain a sharper mind for a longer period of time. Being bilingual helps the brain learn languages faster, exercise the brain, and keep the brain stimulated for a longer period of time. If all Americans

learned Spanish, then their brains would be able to function faster and more efficiently. In addition, people would develop dementia and Alzheimer's disease a few years later. These three examples show the benefits of bilingualism on the cognitive processes of the brain. Being able to speak two languages helps with literacy understanding and development. Bilinguals have a wider range of linguistic possibilities to choose from as they assess a situation. The brain is constantly choosing between the two languages, as stated previously. Bilinguals have a greater metalinguistic awareness, which refers to the person's attention on the meaning or intention of what is being read or spoken. The attention is not on the sounds the words make or the syntactic patterns of the sentences (Cazden 1). Many researchers and scientists claim that when the brain focuses on the meaning and not the sounds the words make, it is an amazing attribute of the mind. The University of France conducted a study where they tested bilingual children to see just how much metalinguistic awareness affected them while taking a given test. The results concluded, "... that children's performance on a phonological awareness task in a language was affected by their proficiency in the language of testing. A bilingual advantage in phonological awareness occurs in Grade 4 and below" (Reder 688). Bilingual children will learn to read more quickly than their peers because of the way their brain processes the words. The children understand the meaning rather than the way it looks and how it is pronounced.

In addition to the bilingual brain processing meaning more quickly, bilingual brains can also understand the rules of language more explicitly. Bilingual brains are better able to control the structure of a language. For example, when attempting to make the word "dog" plural, the brain must process the word "dog" into a compartment of the brain to come up with the formula "dog + s = dogs." Even though this is a simple example, the brain works the same way with more complex grammatical patterns. A bilingual brain helps with this process because it is able to look at the verb and more quickly, efficiently conjugate it into the correct tense. The bilingual brain is able to recognize grammatical patterns faster than a monolingual brain (Buschweitz, Prat 431). This skill will help American children learning Spanish comprehend the different verb tenses and linguistic patterns easier, especially for younger children just learning to read and write. At young ages, the bilingual brain will more quickly

catch on to the patterns and formulas of a certain language and of courses languages (Buschweitz, Prat 432). As for Americans, this skill will help make less speaking errors. Many times while speaking we use the wrong verb tense or forget the tense of a particular verb. Bilingual brains will minimize speaking errors because they are able to recognize the conjugations and patterns. I am not saying bilinguals never or seldom make a mistake. They make mistakes, but the bilingual brain understands the rules of the language more clearly and is able to execute the rules with few mistakes.

Furthermore, bilingualism is proven to increase test scores. Researchers have found that bilingual children who are properly educated in both languages are having better test results. Patrick H. Smith from the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla states, "Educators who understand how students perceive literacy development in two languages are better able to conduct negative perceptions of the minority language, thus increasing the likelihood that schooling will indeed result in high levels of oral and literate proficiency in both languages" (Smith 8). With the proper education, students are able to excel at their studies, even starting at a young age and moving up through high school. Instruction in a native language many improve the skills in the second language, and many educators believe that second- language learning should be a regular part of elementary schooling for all children (Feldman 303). Teaching bilingual students in a native language affects their view of themselves, which creates a better learning environment. As stated above, there are so many benefits to learning a second language, no matter what the language may be. Bilingualism helps the brain with so many processes and developments along with slowing down the aging of the brain. Learning a second language can help children excel in reading, writing, and speaking. When studying a second language, young children are less likely to switch between the two languages because they do not have as deep of a vocabulary or as full understanding of grammar. Effectively teaching Spanish starting at a young age will help students grasp the language and help raise test scores.

However, teaching children a second language at a young age must be done properly. Effective teaching requires participation and support from both the parents/guardians and the teacher. In many cases parents and/or teachers encourage students to only speak in English in schools and at home, not their native language. Author

of Child Development, Feldman stated, “Learning in one’s native tongue is associated with higher-self esteem in minority students” (302). Many people think English is the “successful” language, so they stop using their native language. For immigrants or people who do not know English, it is an excellent choice to learn English, but their native language cannot be forgotten. This idea is especially important to children because they often become discouraged and frustrated when learning a new language. Parents and teachers need to educate the bilingual children about all the benefits bilingualism has on them. Children learning a second language need to be properly educated, so they do not become discouraged.

Lastly, bilingualism helps with behavior and communication of all forms. Neuroscientists and psychologists have come together to state that language is deeply mixed with thought and reasoning, which leads to the question as to why some bilinguals act in certain ways, depending on the language they are speaking at a particular time (DeLang 51). DeLang quotes Susan Ervin-Tripp from the University of California, Berkeley claiming, “[Japanese- English] bilinguals consistently used very different endings depending on the language. For example, give the sentence “Real friends should” a person using Japanese replied “help each other out,” yet in English opted for “be very frank” (51). Her study concluded that bilinguals use two mental channels, one for each language, like two different minds. DeLang claims that she has witnessed small personality variations when one person switches from one language to another. One explanation for this change is that each language brings to mind the values and traditions of culture one experiences while learning the language or being submerged in a particular culture. Also, the memories that are brought to mind might deal with the change in personality and way of thinking. DeLang states, “Language shapes human experience – our very cognition as it goes about classifying the world to make sense of the circumstances at hand” (52). Bilingualism affects the way we act and the words we say. Language has the ability to shape the mind. There are a numerous amount of opportunities one would have if he/ she knew three or four languages.

As previously stated, bilingualism helps to minimize speaking errors, and bilingualism helps express feelings and emotion. With a broader vocabulary in two languages and the ability language has

to alter behavior, it is easier to find the words needed. I have heard bilinguals say that there is no good English word to translate from a different language. With the knowledge of two languages, there is a greater ability to know different words from either language that have slightly different meanings. For example, in English we have one word for “love”. However, in Hebrew there are several different meanings for the word love: *ahab*- spontaneous impulsive love, *hesed*-deliberate choice of affection and kindness, and *raham*-to have compassion, brotherly love (Blue Letter Bible). With knowing more than one language bilinguals are enabled to have a broader selection of words and phrases to choose from when communicating with others.

In regards to communication, employers want their employees to be able to speak more than one language to better communicate with others regarding business matters, customers, future partnerships, foreign matters, etc. Bilinguals are very marketable in the workforce because companies want people who can speak more than one language. With Spanish being so popular, many companies are discovering the language barrier becoming more difficult and becoming a greater problem because more customers can speak only Spanish. Along with companies, hospitals and nursing homes have a large need for bilingual speakers. Many workforces, like hospitals and nursing homes, find it crucial to have a translator on staff at all times. Most people do not need a special degree or schooling to be a translator just to be fluent in both languages (Proctor 81). Bilinguals have many job opportunities being employed, as a much needed translator.

In conclusion, all Americans should learn to speak Spanish because of the cognitive skills, literacy development, and social benefits. Spanish speakers in the United States are growing each year, so the United States has incorporated translations on signs and products, but that simply isn't enough to communicate with the millions of Spanish speakers in America. The people of America need to be able to communicate with these speakers, but also they need to know the number of benefits that coincide with bilingualism. Teaching Spanish to every American will help the people with thinking processes and literacy skills and the America society communicate and find jobs.

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