

Being Bilingual

Communication is key to understanding and connecting with others. Early humans used grunts, but as humankind evolved, language took shape. The ability to express oneself clearly and precisely is crucial to being understood and to understanding others, so speaking two languages doubles one's ability to connect. Being bilingual has shaped and defined me. It has given me the great gift of broadening my perspective of the world by allowing me to access more viewpoints and communicate with a wider variety of people. It has enabled me to understand the subtleties and connotations of each language and recognize the exact reason a speaker or author chooses a particular word. My bilingualism widens my worldview and gives me deeper insight into others.

For me, the major effect of bilingualism is that it gives me a lens into two societies with differing cultures, values, and histories. For instance, unlike most monolingual people, I recognize that people can have opposite reactions to a phrase with different connotations in different languages, due to the society's history and culture. For example, when the American government says, "In God We Trust," it does not shock people, even though the government is supposedly secular. However, if the French government, which is also secular, used such a phrase, the entire population would be stunned. This dramatic reaction comes from the fact that America did not face religious wars or strong pressure from the Vatican when it announced its secularism. As a bilingual person, I comprehend both points of views, which broadens my understanding of the different societies, allows me to connect well to people from both cultures, and ultimately deepens me as a human being.

Bilingualism also transforms me because it allows me to understand the subtleties and connotations of the words of each language. I can communicate with more people without stopping the flow or depth of a conversation because of hesitation about a word's meaning, or because I do not know the precise word to transmit my thought with the proper

connotations. In addition to allowing me to connect to others, I can also more thoroughly appreciate the literature of each culture without the need for a translator. For instance, the conclusion of French writer Émile Zola's letter "J'accuse" contains an anaphora of the word "j'accuse," which means "I accuse," clearly demonstrating his outrage towards the government. But the force and persuasiveness of this anaphora is lost in some English translations, so an English speaker would not feel Zola's full power. As another example, the French words "mur," "cloison," and "muraille," all translate as "wall" in English. Yet each word refers to a different kind of wall, which the French speaker would understand, thus allowing a precise visualization of the scene being described.

I consider myself fortunate to be bilingual. I have the power to see a wide range of attitudes and personalities. As I grow older, I hope to use this gift to live a fuller life and to make a difference to others.