

# Unlocking Creativity

How learning a second language fuels innovative thinking

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– Giovanni Giovannelli, *President English language Learning, Pearson*

## Unlocking Creativity: How learning a second language fuels innovative thinking

Imagine a room filled with bright young candidates, each given a complex problem to solve. As they strategize and brainstorm, a pattern becomes evident: those who speak multiple languages approach the challenge with unique, creative solutions. This was the scene I still remember, eight years ago in Brazil, when we launched our groundbreaking trainee program at Pearson. The lesson was clear – language learning isn't just about communication—it's about expanding how we think.

The concept of “creativity” can often seem like a mysterious force, a natural gift that some people are born with and others are not. This is not the case. At its core, creativity is the ability to produce novel and useful ideas, ideas that are not only original but that also serve some purpose<sup>1</sup>. Inventing a recipe, brainstorming new ideas for a product, or even solving a conflict with friends all use creativity. So whilst creativity is often thought of as an innate talent, research suggests that it's actually a skill that can be developed and enhanced<sup>2</sup> – and learning a second language may be one way to boost this ability.

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What is it about learning a second language that might enhance creativity? It all comes down to how the brain manages multiple languages. Moving between two (or more) languages is a juggling act that requires cognitive flexibility, which is the ability to modify your thinking in response to changing situations or new information. People who know multiple languages regularly practice this skill as they switch between languages, adapt to different grammatical structures, and search for the right words and phrases. Studies show that individuals who speak more than one language perform better on tasks that require cognitive flexibility<sup>3,4</sup>. As a fluent speaker of several languages, this juggling act has become almost second nature to me. Through years of dedicated language learning and practice, I no longer have to consciously think about switching between languages—it just happens naturally, and it’s something I deeply appreciate. For example, I might be talking to colleagues in one language and then seamlessly switch to another when I get a phone call. This effortless switch between languages not only refreshes me but also gives me a special kind of energy that I am very grateful for.





This mental agility isn't just useful for communicating in another language. It spills over into other areas of life, promoting divergent thinking, which is a core component of creativity. Divergent thinking is the ability to flexibly produce many new and different ideas or solutions. In other words, it is the raw material of creative potential. Studies comparing monolinguals and bilinguals found a bilingual advantage on divergent thinking tasks<sup>5,6</sup>. They were better at coming up with a variety of original ideas. When people switch between languages, they often find themselves exploring different ways to express the same idea, which in turn strengthens their capacity to think flexibly and from multiple perspectives. This is something I've experienced personally as well. I particularly remember when I first moved to Brazil without speaking Portuguese. After a few months of learning the language, I noticed that I started to see things differently, viewing tasks and problems from new perspectives.

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And there's more to learning other languages than just the acquisition of new language skills; it also offers a window into different cultures. When learning a second language people often learn about the culture it represents as well or even travel to experience that culture firsthand. Research suggests that multicultural experiences, like living in a new country, are linked to increased creativity<sup>7</sup>. In fact, one study reported that individuals who had lived in a new cultural setting for the longest time, speaking the local language, also had the strongest divergent thinking skills<sup>8</sup>. Multicultural experiences may require individuals to step outside their comfort zones, promoting a general openness to the unknown. Exposure to a new culture also opens people up to new ways of thinking, such as recognizing that the same behavior may have very different connotations in different cultures. Learning another language doesn't just add vocabulary – it adds layers of cultural richness that could fuel imaginative and original thinking.

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One of the most exciting implications of the link between learning additional languages and creativity is its potential impact on group settings, such collaborative projects at work. Culturally diverse teams often demonstrate more creativity and stronger problem-solving abilities<sup>9</sup>. When team members bring diverse experiences, they're more likely to share a wider range of information, perspectives, and ideas with each other<sup>10</sup>. This rich exchange of knowledge sets the stage for higher levels of team creativity. People who know additional languages frequently straddle multiple cultural worlds, which positions them to play a pivotal role in fostering this kind of creative synergy.

I see this every day at work. My division at Pearson brings together individuals with diverse languages and cultural backgrounds, and I'm always amazed by how unpredictable the outcomes of our conversations can be. We had an offsite earlier this year with my leadership team and when we discussed product innovation, the breadth of the languages and experiences around the table made a real difference. I genuinely believe that a team made up of individuals speaking the same first language and sharing the same cultural experiences would not be as creative.

Learning another language offers much more than just the ability to communicate in that language. It has the potential to enhance creativity, nurtured through the mental flexibility of juggling languages and the broadened perspectives gained from multicultural experiences. Whether you're a student, a professional, or someone simply looking to expand your horizons, learning another language might just be the key to unlocking your creative potential. So why not embrace the adventure of learning another language? Your brain – and your creativity – will thank you for it.



## References

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### About the author

Giovanni Giovannelli, known as Gio, has led Pearson's English Language Learning division since 2021. With over 25 years of global leadership experience spanning Europe, the US, Latin America, and Asia, Gio has previously served as President of Pearson's International Markets and held CEO positions at four prominent companies in Brazil. In addition to these executive roles, he has been a board member for leading BOVESPA-listed companies, including Natura and CVC Viagens. Gio holds a PhD in Economics from Bocconi University and completed the OPM program at Harvard Business School.

Gio's leadership is driven by a deep belief in the transformative power of language learning. Born in Italy, his fascination with languages began at age seven with English. He later became fluent in Portuguese while working in Brazil, and his English skills helped him advance in multinational corporations. Alongside Italian, English, and Portuguese, Gio is also fluent in Spanish and French, viewing language as a vital enrichment to both his personal and professional life.

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