

Improving Focus

How learning a
second language
develops self-
management skills

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Learning a new language is hard work, but every time you sit down to practice, you're also exercising the mental muscles that help you focus, plan, and stay organized.

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

Improving Focus: How learning a second language develops self-management skills

We live in a world designed to pull us in a thousand directions at once. Between social media notifications, endless scrolling, and constant connectivity, it's easy to lose focus. Self-management can be our secret weapon to thriving in this digital world by helping us pay attention, prioritize, and follow through on our plans. There are many ways to build self-management skills, but one surprising strategy is learning a second language. Why might learning a second language improve self-management? The answer lies in how language learning strengthens your executive functions, which are the foundational set of mental processes that allow us to concentrate, pay attention, and implement planned behavior. Language learning is a complex and challenging cognitive activity that plays a role in building these capabilities.

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“Research shows that bilinguals perform better on auditory attention tasks.”

As someone who speaks five languages and has had the privilege of leading multinational organizations across multiple countries, I've come to deeply appreciate the importance of self-management skills. These abilities are not only essential for navigating the complexities of leadership but also for balancing the demands of family life—I'm an Italian father of two Brazilian teenagers...

One experience that stands out is from a critical business negotiation in Latin America. I found myself switching between English, Spanish, and Portuguese to ensure that every stakeholder felt truly understood. This wasn't just about knowing the languages—it was about staying focused and agile, processing different perspectives in real-time, and adapting my communication style on the spot. Moments like these remind me of how vital it is to train your brain to stay sharp under pressure.

At home, it's a different kind of balancing act. I remember a time when my youngest had a school project due the same week I was preparing for a major board presentation. Juggling those competing demands taught me to focus on what truly matters, prioritize effectively, and, perhaps most importantly, ask for help when needed.



“ Research suggests that learning a second language builds working memory capacity. ”

Let's delve a little deeper into how learning a second language supports self-management. When you learn and speak a new language, your brain is working overtime. This mental workout strengthens several key executive functions:

Working memory: This is like your brain's sticky note, holding information in your mind temporarily while you use it. Working memory is key to making step-by-step plans and keeping track of your goals. Research suggests that learning a second language builds working memory capacity¹. In order to use the correct words, bilinguals must keep both languages in mind constantly, meaning they are always engaging their working memory. Moreover, being bilingual may induce functional changes in the brain that enhance its efficiency. For instance, one study found that bilinguals exhibit more streamlined neural connections². The efficiency of brain networks is associated with better working memory³.



Cognitive control: Have you ever had to focus on one task while tuning out distractions? Cognitive control is what allows you to do that successfully. It helps you filter out unnecessary information, manage competing pieces of information, and stay on track towards your goals. In one piece of research, bilingual children outperformed monolinguals on tasks that require cognitive control⁴. To speak multiple languages, you need a strong language control system to monitor and ensure that you are using the correct language. This typically utilizes areas on the left side of your brain. Another neuroimaging study found activation in these same areas in the brains of bilinguals during non-language tasks⁵, suggesting that their strong language control system supported a more general-purpose executive control.

Attention: In addition to maintaining focused attention on a single task, self-management requires shifting your attention between several different activities while working towards your goals. Switching between languages and ensuring you use the right one at the right time gives you plenty of practice managing attention. Research shows that bilinguals perform better on auditory attention tasks⁶. In fact, one study found improvements in attention after just one week of intensive language training⁷.

“ Lifelong learning, particularly through activities such as language acquisition, plays an important role in enhancing self-management skills and maintaining cognitive vitality throughout the lifespan. ”

Self-management is also a key contributor to lifelong learning. With all the recent technological advancements and changes to the workplace, learning how to learn is an increasingly important skill for employees to have. You need to recognize what you do and don't know, choose the right strategies to help you learn, and figure out whether these strategies are actually working. Interestingly, research shows that knowing a second language might help you be a better learner, at least in language-related tasks. Bilinguals may approach language learning tasks in a more thoughtful and intentional way⁸ and could be more accurate at judging whether they've learned something correctly or not⁹.

Lifelong learning, particularly through activities such as language acquisition, plays an important role in enhancing self-management skills and maintaining cognitive vitality throughout the lifespan. For older adults, learning a new language was associated with improved attention and cognitive control^{10,11}. You could say that learning and using a second language is a long-term investment in your brain health!

All of this research tells an exciting story about how learning a new language can be a gateway to building lifelong self-management skills. Learning a new language is hard work, but every time you sit down to practice, you're also exercising the mental muscles that help you focus, plan, and stay organized. My experience learning and speaking multiple languages has shaped the way I approach self-management. I'm curious—what techniques do you use to stay focused and flexible when life gets complicated? Sharing stories like these has always been a great way for me to connect with others and learn new strategies.



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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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