Speaking foreign languages ‘helps stop mental decline’

Kaya Burgess

Speaking more than one language can protect the brain from mental decline and boost thinking skills, according to a study of people with multiple sclerosis. Researchers believe their report is the first to “test the idea that speaking multiple languages protects against decline in brain function.”

They compared the brain activity of bilingual patients with MS to that of bilingual people without MS. They also compared the cognitive abilities of monolingual MS patients to those of monolingual people without MS.

Among those who spoke more than one language fluently, they found that bilingual MS patients scored similarly to bilingual people without the condition. But in the other group “patients (with MS) who had fluency in only one language performed worse than the monolingual control group.”

The University of Reading study published in the journal *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, assessed two measures of cognitive function of patients at the Gregorio Marañon hospital in Madrid.

The first is known as “monitoring”, which is the ability to analyse and alter a way of thinking to find new strategies for solving problems or making decisions. It has been compared by some researchers with an ability to “think about your own way of thinking” or “think outside the box”. The second is “inhibitory control”, which is the ability to inhibit or control natural impulses or responses to events and stimuli.

The study found that MS patients who spoke just one language showed similar levels of inhibitory control to those without MS but showed “significantly worse monitoring abilities”, suggesting that speaking a second language can improve your ability to think laterally when faced with a challenge.

Christos Pliatsikas, an associate professor in psycholinguistics at Reading, said: “Previous studies have provided some clues as to the potential effect of speaking multiple languages on the brain and its power to protect against disease, including increasing the volume of several brain areas that are usually connected to language learning and processing. This study shows how this idea is taking place in practice.”

Other studies have looked at the benefits of speaking multiple languages. One found that, for monolingual adults, the average age for showing the first signs of dementia was 71.4, whereas for multilingual adults, the average age was 75.5.

Another found that bilingual people were better at retaining shopping lists, names and directions. Bilingual people were also found to be better at observing their surroundings by focusing on relevant information and tuning out what was less important.