

Why learning a new language should be your New Year's resolution

December 22 2015, by Katie Thompson

As the champagne corks pop at the end of the New Year's Eve countdown, it's the perfect time to think about what you'd like to accomplish in 2016.

Dr Ruth Arber and Dr Michiko Weinmann, Co-Directors of Deakin University's Centre for Teaching and Learning Languages (CTaLL), argue that learning a new language should be top of your list.

Dr Arber, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, believes that a new year is a great opportunity to join the multilingual ranks of the one in five Australians who speak a language other than English.

"A multitude of research shows that learning a new language offers many rewards," Dr Arber explained.

"And whether you're heading overseas during summer or planning a winter escape in 2016, being able to speak even just a few words of the local language can turn your trip into an amazing and engaging adventure."

Dr Weinmann, Lecturer in Teaching Languages, agreed and explained that language and languages are a key part of individual identity.

"Our language and cultural identity are heavily intertwined. That's one of the reasons why, when you travel, the local people really appreciate any efforts to learn their language," Dr Weinmann explained.

"Not only that, there's lots of evidence that points to the amazing ways that learning a new language can stretch your brain and even develop new neural pathways."

According to Dr Weinmann, there are plenty of resources available.

"Whether you've never tried a new language or dropped out of language study in secondary school – which is the point where most people stop learning a language – there are lots of options available," Dr Weinmann said.

"Seek out a course at your local TAFE, language centres, or simply pop into your local library and pick up some language guides, podcasts, or audio books that you can listen to at home.

"If you already have some language skills already and want to mix and mingle with other speakers, a local Language Meetup group is a great option. Or, if you're in a regional or rural area, a U3A (University of the Third Age) group is also a good place to start."

"It's never too late to start learning a language. And once you've mastered a second language, the skills you've learned along the way will make it that much easier to learn a third or even fourth language."

Here are Dr Arber and Dr Weinmann's top five reasons why learning a new language should be on your to-do list in 2016.

1. For each new language you learn, you'll stave off dementia for about five years

A recent study by York University in Toronto – one of many on the subject – found that learning a second language can have a positive

effect on the brain and delay the onset of dementia.

On average, the study found that individuals who speak two languages developed dementia nearly five years after individuals who only spoke one language.

"To put this into context – learning a second language, even as an adult, can help you stave off dementia better than any drug on the market can," Dr Arber explained.

2. You'll recover from a stroke much more quickly

A University of Edinburgh study published in the American Heart Association journal Stroke found that stroke patients are more likely to regain their cognitive functions if they speak more than one language.

"Of the 600 stroke victims in the study, those who spoke two or more languages were twice as likely to have intact cognitive functions post-stroke than those who spoke just one language," Dr Arber explained.

"The theory is that the mental challenge of speaking multiple languages provides a kind of cognitive reserve – a protective barrier, almost – that helps the brain cope with damaging influences such as stroke or dementia."

3. You'll become a better multi-tasker and boost your memory and attention span

People who can speak two or more languages are skilled at switching between two systems of speech, writing, and structure. This juggling makes them good at multi-tasking as they are used to switching between different structures.

"When you work in a different language, you're thinking in a different way and even moving differently," Dr Weinmann explained.

4. You'll become more employable

The ability to speak a second language can lead to diverse employment opportunities, make you stand out in a sea of job applications, and give you an edge in this age of global citizenry.

"Scan through the job ads and, chances are, you'll see hundreds of jobs that list 'ability to speak a second language' as a desired skill," Dr Weinmann said.

"Employers today are looking for well-rounded employees who are global citizens and have an understanding of other cultures and being able to speak another language certainly ticks those boxes."

5. You'll become a better traveller

From being able to read the menu to knowing when the cleaners in the hotel room are talking about you, being able to engage with what's going on around you will add a new dimension to your holiday.

Even if you're not fluent in the local language, locals will appreciate that you've made the effort to connect in their tongue.

"My son has learnt how to order a beer in 44 different languages," Dr Arber laughed.

"He's found it's a great way to break the ice in a new city."

"A deeper knowledge of the local [language](#) will enable you to have real

conversations with the people you meet, make new friends, make useful business contacts, and who knows, you might even find your soulmate."

Provided by Deakin University

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