

Students who self-identify as multilingual perform better in exams

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Young people who consider themselves 'multilingual' tend to perform better across a wide range of subjects at school, regardless of whether they are actually fluent in another language, new research shows.

The study, of more than 800 pupils in England, found a [positive relationship](#) between GCSE scores and 'multilingual identity': a reference to whether pupils felt a personal connection with other languages through knowledge and use. Those who self-identified as multilingual typically outperformed their peers not just in subjects such as French and Spanish, but in non-[language](#) subjects including maths, geography and science. This applied whether or not they actually spoke a second language fluently.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, not all pupils who were officially described by their schools as having 'English as a Second Language' (EAL) thought of themselves as multilingual, even though the term is used by schools and Government as a proxy for multilingualism. Correspondingly, these pupils did not necessarily perform better (or worse) as a group at GCSE than their non-EAL peers.

The results indicate that encouraging pupils to identify with languages and to value different styles of communication could help them to develop a mindset that supports academic progress overall.

[Other recent research](#) has argued for broadening the scope of language lessons so that, as well as studying vocabulary and grammar, pupils explore the importance of languages and their significance for their own lives. This new study was the first, however, to examine the relationship between multilingual identity and attainment. It was led by academics at the University of Cambridge and the findings are published in the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*.

Dr. Dee Rutgers, a Research Associate at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said: "The evidence suggests that the more multilingual you consider yourself to be, the higher your GCSE scores. While we need to understand more about why that relationship exists, it may be that children who see themselves as multilingual have a sort of

'growth mindset' which impacts on wider attainment."

Dr. Linda Fisher, Reader in Languages Education at the University of Cambridge, said: "There could be a strong case for helping children who think that they can't 'do' languages to recognize that we all use a range of communication tools, and that learning a language is simply adding to that range. This may influence attitude and self-belief, which is directly relevant to learning at school. In other words, what you think you are may be more important than what others say you are."

The study's authors argue that being multilingual means far more than the [official EAL definition](#) of being 'exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English'. They suggest that even young people who see themselves as monolingual possess a 'repertoire' of communication. For example, they may use different dialects, pick up words and phrases on holiday, know sign language, or understand other types of 'language' such as computer code.

The study involved 818 Year-11 pupils at five secondary schools in South East England. As well as establishing whether pupils were officially registered as EAL or non-EAL, the researchers asked each pupil if they personally identified as such. Separately, each [pupil](#) was asked to plot where they saw themselves on a 0-100 scale, where 0 represented 'monolingual' and 100 'multilingual'. This data was compared with their GCSE results in nine subjects.

Students who spoke a [second language](#) at home did not always personally identify either as EAL or multilingual. Conversely, pupils who saw themselves as multilingual were not always those earmarked by the school as having English as an additional language.

"The fact that these terms didn't correlate more closely is surprising considering that they are all supposedly measuring the same thing,"

Rutgers said. "Just having experience of other languages clearly doesn't necessarily translate into a multilingual identity because the experience may not be valued by the student."

School-reported EAL status had no impact on GCSE results, although pupils who self-identified as EAL generally did better than their peers in modern languages. Those who considered themselves 'multilingual' on the 0-100 scale, however, performed better academically across the board.

The strength of this relationship varied between subjects and was, again, particularly pronounced in modern languages. In all nine GCSE subjects assessed, however, each point increase on the monolingual-to-multilingual scale was associated with a fractional rise in pupils' exam scores.

For example: a one-point increase was found to correspond to 0.012 of a grade in Science, and 0.011 of a grade in Geography. Students who consider themselves very multilingual would, by this measure, typically score a full grade higher than those who consider themselves monolingual. Positively identifying as multilingual could often therefore be enough to push students who would otherwise fall slightly short of a certain grade up to the next level.

The findings appear to indicate that the positive mentality and self-belief which typically develops among pupils with a multilingual identity has spill-over benefits for their wider education. The authors add that this could be cultivated in languages classrooms: for example, by exposing [young people](#) to learning programs that explore different types of language and dialect, or encouraging them to think about how languages shape their lives both inside and outside school.

"Too often we think about other languages as something that we don't

need to know, or as difficult to learn," Fisher said. "These findings suggest that if pupils were encouraged to see themselves as active and capable language learners, it could have a really positive impact on their wider progress at [school](#)."

More information: Dieuwerke Rutgers et al, Multilingualism, Multilingual Identity and Academic Attainment: Evidence from Secondary Schools in England, *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/15348458.2021.1986397](https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2021.1986397)

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