

# Bilingualism and ageing

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Many older people keep mentally active and enjoy using 'brain training' puzzles and games for their leisure, however the science on their efficacy is as yet partial and inconclusive.

Another area which is as yet, still not fully understood and has also resulted in conflicting results, is whether being bilingual offers a protective factor in age-related conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

A small-scale study of bilingual Welsh/English speakers funded by the Economic & Social Research Council, was led by Prof Linda Clare of Bangor University's School of Psychology. At the outset of the research, there was no evidence available about the effects of bilingualism for older Welsh speakers. The now completed study has found no evidence for a significant delay in the onset of Alzheimer's Disease in Welsh/English bilinguals. This finding was comparable to that in Montreal, Canada where no bilingual advantage was found in non-immigrant bilinguals.

One explanation, researchers suggest, is that where people have grown up speaking two languages in a bilingual community, the simultaneous language use may be an automatic and effortless process for lifelong bilinguals, so not sufficiently 'mentally challenging', as compared to the mental activity required by bilinguals who have acquired fluency in a second language at a later stage.

"This may perhaps make bilingualism less likely to provide resilience in the face of cognitive impairment" Professor Linda Clare suggests.

Prof Clare adds:

"Moving science forward can be very piece-meal and slow- we hear about the breakthroughs, but for each breakthrough, there are other research questions which are less dramatic in their results, but no less important. Having completed this small study, the information gained may lead the way for us or others to refine or enlarge the research to see whether we can learn more about what is actually taking place, and improve our understanding..."

A research paper on the findings is available in the *Journal of Neuropsychology*.

**More information:** "Bilingualism, executive control, and age at diagnosis among people with early-stage Alzheimer's disease in Wales." *J Neuropsychol*. 2014 Nov 25. [DOI: 10.1111/jnp.12061](https://doi.org/10.1111/jnp.12061). [Epub ahead of print]

Provided by Bangor University

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