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**Third language acquisition;  
the benefits for companies  
and employees.**

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## How training to use multiple languages gives a business the edge in an increasingly competitive globalised marketplace

<sup>1</sup> Ofer Shoshan, "These five global business learners speak multiple languages. Should you?", Entrepreneur magazine, October 2015.

In today's globalised world, many professionals no longer find that knowing two languages is enough, and are learning a third. Indeed, it is not rare for business leaders to speak multiple languages.

**Marissa Mayer, the former CEO of Yahoo**  
Speaks: English, German and Spanish

**Léo Apotheker, the ex-CEO of SAP and HP**  
Speaks: German, Dutch, French, English and Hebrew

Each of these figures have credited their multi-language abilities with giving them an edge in their professional life; giving them communication skills and intercultural awareness that enable them to build business relationships across their company's international network.

But how difficult is it to train a workforce to use a third language? And which languages should a company focus on?

## The experience of learning a third language

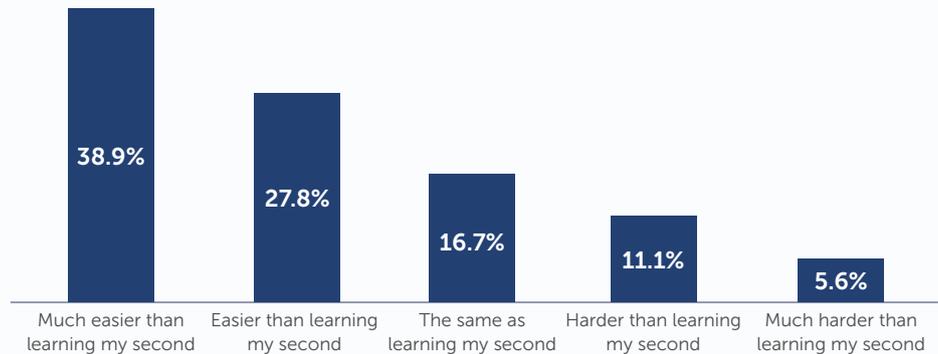
Research has shown that once a person has a second language, adding a third to their skillset is easier. This is because language-learners draw on their knowledge of their native language (L1) and their second language (L2) in order to memorise the third (L3) – particularly if they are similar.

This process is called **positive transfer**. The learner relies on already familiar sounds, words, and grammatical structures to speed up their L3 language acquisition<sup>2</sup>.

These findings are echoed by the **Fluentify B2B Language Survey 2020**. When we surveyed professionals who spoke multiple languages, 66.7% said that learning their third language was "easier" or "much easier" than learning their second.

<sup>2</sup> Francois Grosjean Ph.D, "Can a second language help you learn a third?", Psychology Today, June 2015.

Learning my third language was:



The efficiencies of being bilingual, when acquiring a further language, were highlighted in a study done by the University of Haifa, Israel which tested 40 bilingual students (who spoke Russian and Hebrew) and 42 monolingual students (who spoke only Hebrew) on their ability to learn a new language: English. After comparing results, researchers discovered that on average, the bilingual students achieved marks that were 20% higher in their English exam than the monolinguals<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> University of Haifa, "Bilinguals find it easier to learn a third language", Science Daily, February 2011.

## The business advantages of multilingualism in the workplace

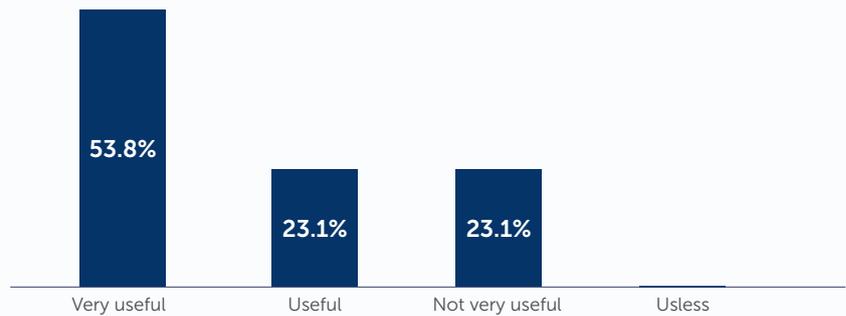
Even when the official language of a company is English, multilingualism benefits both the employee and business. This can be for a variety of reasons:

- In their 2016 study, 'Language awareness and multilingual workplace', Ifigenia Mahili and Jo Angouri noted that: *"Multilingual staff are often seen as easier to move between posts, branches and countries; they make more contacts and contracts and help expand a company network and meet financial targets."*<sup>4</sup>
- Staff who speak the local language (as well as English and their native tongue) tend to possess greater interpersonal skills.
- Staff who speak the resident language build trust quicker with local teams lower down the organisational chain. For this reason, multilingual staff are better able to uncover useful information, identify opportunities and increase their company's bottom line.

<sup>4</sup> Ifigenia Mahili and Jo Angouri, "Language awareness and multilingual workplace", Springer International Publishing, 2016.

In the Fluentify **B2B Language Survey 2020**, professionals overwhelmingly agreed that learning a third language would benefit their career.

How useful would learning a third language be for your career?



### But which languages are the most useful for employees to know?

The value of having multilingual staff depends on whether those languages match with the company’s business activities. Here, there seems to be a clear hierarchy of languages.

The jobs website Adzuna analysed over one million job postings on its website, aimed at native English speakers who spoke at least one other language. **It found out that some languages are more likely to get you a higher paid job than others.** The top three languages which commanded the highest pay, in ascending order, were:

<sup>5</sup> Lianna Brinded, “The top nine languages for the highest paid jobs in Britain”, The Independent, September 2016.



<sup>6</sup> “Germany, country profile”, The Observatory of Economic complexity (OEC), 2017.

It is unsurprising that German was the most desirable language. German has the largest number of native speakers in the European Union. It is also the world’s second-largest exporter and the largest economy in Europe<sup>6</sup>.

## Training staff to use a third language: Fluentify’s training roadmap

Most participants in the **Fluentify B2B Language Acquisition Survey 2020** already learned their second language before they embarked on their third (77.8% compared to 22.2%<sup>7</sup>).



However, it is possible to train staff in a second and third languages simultaneously. In fact, giving learners greater exposure to different languages at once can often increase their confidence.

<sup>7</sup> “Fluentify B2B language survey,” Fluentify UK Ltd, October 2020.

As one multiple-language learner expressed:

<sup>8</sup> “Fluentify B2B language survey,” Fluentify UK Ltd, October 2020.

*“Learning two languages at once can help you learn both. Your brain relaxes and accepts that you speak different languages. You get used to it and perhaps lose your inhibitions. You lose your tunnel vision [about language] that things must be this way<sup>8</sup>.”*

Success in this type of training depends on three factors:

- Differentiating the languages;
- Oral practice;
- Giving the learner processing time after lessons, to fully absorb what they have learned.

Let’s look at each one in more detail.

## Differentiating the languages

The main challenge of learning two languages at once is differentiating them when speaking. Confusion happens particularly when the two languages originate from the same lexical family – for example, English and German or Spanish and French – due to the quantity of similar-sounding words.

**It is therefore important for the learner to find ways to partition the languages in their mind.**

An effective way to do this is to use visual triggers, such as different coloured flash cards for each language. Associating a language with a colour helps a learner's brain assimilate the difference.

With very similar languages, the learner should focus on the differences, paying particular attention to false friends such as (words that sound the same but have different meanings) 'actual' which means 'real' in English and 'current' in Spanish and Italian.

If the two languages are very different – for example, German and Japanese – the learner should focus on the similarities between those languages and the learner's mother tongue, to help them make sense of it.

## Speaking

The majority of practice, at least in the early stages, will come from lessons with a language coach. **Just as with learning a single language, the most important thing is to produce the language – i.e. to speak (first and foremost) and write it.**

Writing example sentences will help the learner to understand a grammar or vocabulary point in a context that works for them.

Listening to short audio pieces is important to improve comprehension. However, learners must listen to pieces that they understand. Long, complicated pieces will go over the learner's head and will not improve language acquisition.

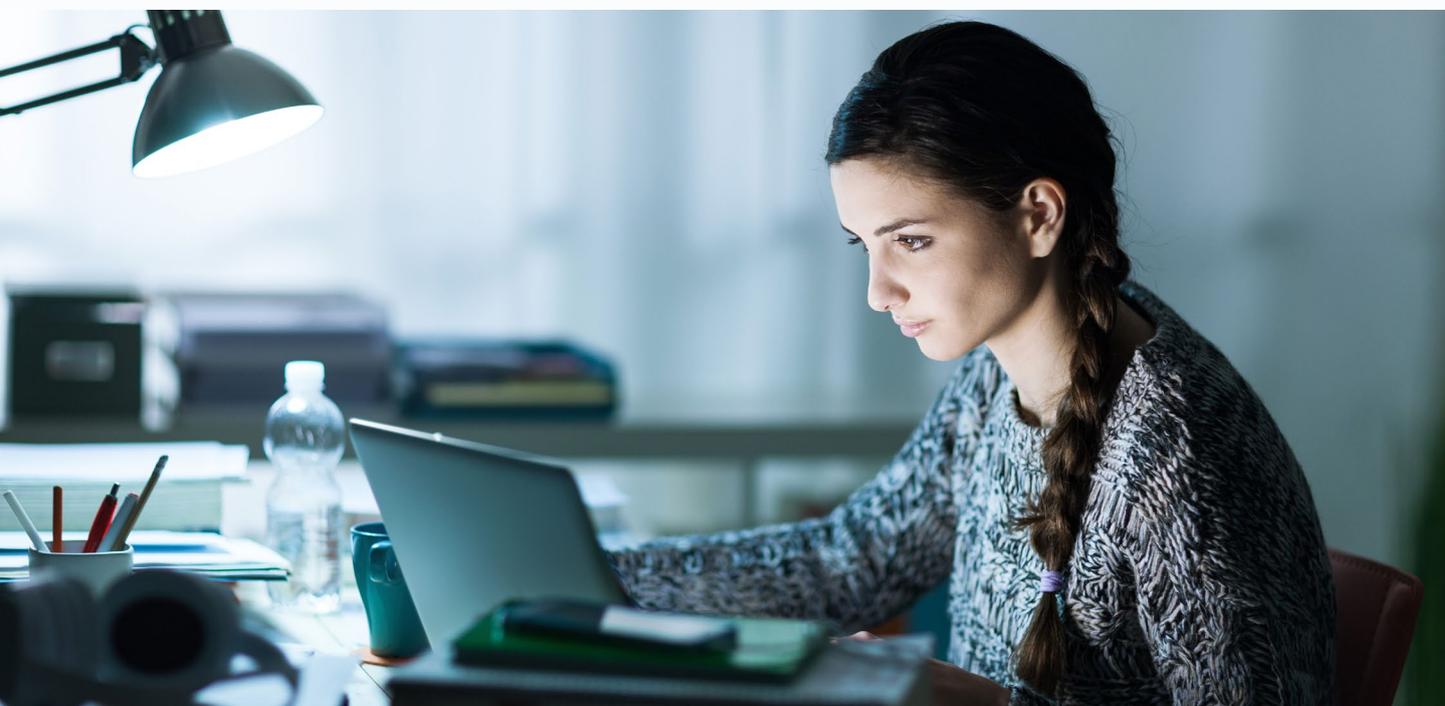


## Processing

Much like the way that athletes grow muscle during rest periods as well as training, language acquisition doesn't just happen in lessons. It also occurs in the period after lessons when the mind is absorbing and processing what it has learned.

This is particularly important when the learner is studying two languages simultaneously. After an L2 lesson, a learner needs time (a day or two at least) to process what they have learned before returning to the other language.

If they jump straight into the other language, their training will be compromised.



## About Fluentify

Fluentify is a consolidated language training company with offices in London, Paris, Milan, Rome and Turin as well as a commercial presence in Switzerland. The company is active in the long-distance learning sector through its innovating online tutoring platform for business English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. With a constantly growing team, and over 180 mother-tongue tutors operating from all over the world, Fluentify offers its services to hundreds of companies around the world, which have chosen this innovating approach offered by the company to improve the way their employees learn languages.





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