

Perceived Benefits of Foreign Language Learning and Bilingualism: Results from a Survey among Korean University Students

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외국어 학습의 이점, 한국인 영어 학습자, 학습자 신념, 이중언어

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Abstract

The present study examined Korean university students' beliefs about benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism. Given challenges facing language education (e.g., declining enrollments and the rise of AI-powered translation tools), understanding students' perceptions is crucial. A mixed-methods survey of 351 university students revealed six key perceived benefits: improved communication skills, academic and career advancement, cultural awareness, interpersonal benefits, personal development, and cognitive advantages. While students strongly endorsed practical benefits such as employability and cultural openness, awareness of cognitive benefits (e.g., enhanced executive function and delayed cognitive decline) was limited. Regression analysis showed that students who had taken more applied linguistics or related courses held more positive beliefs. This suggests that formal education plays a key role in shaping perceptions. Findings of this study highlight a need for targeted educational efforts to promote a broader understanding of bilingualism's cognitive and social advantages. Raising awareness of these benefits may encourage sustained engagement in foreign language learning, reinforcing its long-term value in an era of increasing multilingualism and technological changes.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is a fact of life for more than half of the world's population today (Grosjean, 2021) and is considered a valuable resource to individuals and societies. However, during the first half of the twentieth century, bilingualism was under dire assessments, often perceived as a barrier to intellectual development and thus something to be avoided. The negative views toward bilingualism are well reflected in the writings of early researchers such as the influential educator and linguist Simon S. Laurie (1890) who stated:

If it were possible for a child to live in two languages at once equally well, so much the worse. His intellectual and

spiritual growth would not thereby be doubled but halved. Unity of mind and character would have great difficulty in asserting itself in such circumstances. (p. 15)

Similar views were expressed by Jespersen (1922) who noted, “The brain effort required to master two languages instead of one certainly diminishes the child’s power of learning other things which might and ought to be learnt” (p. 148). Empirical research conducted at that time supported these negative perspectives on bilingualism by demonstrating that monolingual children outperformed their bilingual counterparts on a range of cognitive tasks (Darcy, 1946; Jones & Stewart, 1951; Saer, 1923). These studies typically employed intelligence or academic achievement measures to assess cognitive abilities, often concluding that bilingualism was associated with lower performance across various domains. The results suggested that the mental juggling of two languages could lead to confusion, cognitive overload, and academic underperformance. However, the change of tide in the perspective of bilingualism began with the seminal study by Peal and Lambert (1962), which was among the first to problematize methodological weaknesses of earlier studies, namely the lack of control for potentially confounding variables (e.g., socio-economic status, educational opportunities, language of assessment, urban-rural contexts) that may influence cognitive performance. By controlling for these factors, Peal and Lambert revealed that bilingual children outperformed monolingual counterparts on both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests. These findings challenged the dominant view of bilingualism back then and marked a pivotal moment in understanding bilingualism.

Since Peal and Lambert (1962), the view on bilingualism and second language (L2) learning has shifted significantly, with a substantial body of research reporting a range of benefits that bilingualism can afford to individuals and society. These benefits span various domains of life, including cognitive, academic, social, and economic aspects (see Fox, Corretjer, & Webb, 2019; Fox, Corretjer, Webb, & Tian, 2019; Valdés et al., 2004 for reviews on the benefits of bi- and multilingualism). Research has highlighted that bilingualism is associated with increased executive functions (e.g., cognitive flexibility, working memory) (Antoniou, 2019; Monnier et al., 2022), enhanced creativity (Fürst & Grin, 2018, 2021), delayed onset of dementia and other age-related cognitive declines (Del Maschio et al., 2018; Perani et al., 2017), increased metalinguistic awareness and ability to learn additional languages (Huang, 2018; Sanz, 2000), higher empathy and open-mindedness (Dewaele & Botes, 2020; Dewaele & Stavans, 2014), greater employability (Millar, 2017; Porras et al., 2014), and a higher level of well-being (Wang & Wei, 2024). While it would be misleading to portray bilingualism as a complete bliss without any challenges, there is no dispute that embracing bilingualism can lead to personal enrichment for individuals at all stages of life, from infancy to older adulthood, as well as societal benefits such as enhanced cultural diversity, improved social integration, and increased economic competitiveness.

Although the dire assessments of bilingualism once prevalent in society—such as the belief that bilinguals are mentally confused and at a disadvantage in intelligence compared with monolinguals (Saer, 1923, p. 53)—no longer dominate public perceptions, additional language learning is facing new challenges in recent years that appear to jeopardize its well-being once again. These challenges include declining enrollments in language courses, elimination of foreign language degree programs in higher education, large institutional cuts to support foreign language education, to name a few. Sadly, this daunting reality for foreign language learning is not confined to a specific region but a global trend affecting many parts of the world including inner circle countries such as the U.S. (N. Anderson, 2023) and Australia (Hefferman & Carroll, 2023) and expanding circle countries such as China (Kim, 2024) and South Korea (Choi et al., 2024). It remains uncertain whether the drop in language enrollments in higher education has triggered high-stakes decisions that undermine the promotion of linguistic diversity, or if it is these decisions themselves that have fostered public disinterest in foreign language studies, ultimately leading to enrollment drops in relevant programs. However, what seems clear is that while bilingualism may have been successful at overcoming past misconceptions, it has once again found itself in a place of vulnerability where the value of learning additional languages may need to be reaffirmed and rearticulated to ensure its relevance and importance in today’s world.

The role of foreign language learning appears to have become even more precarious in recent years as automatic translation has become ubiquitous through generative artificial intelligence (AI) powered tools such as ChatGPT and DALL-E, as well as other machine translation services including Google Translate and Papago. Much of the general discourse surrounding generative AI in relation to language learning has focused on its impressive capabilities and efficiency in facilitating communication across different languages, often leaving many to ponder whether foreign language learning remains necessary in light of generative AI advancements (Matsakis, 2024). For those who assess the necessity of language learning strictly by its utility for word-for-word translation and immediate communication needs, the value of learning an additional language may appear diminished in the AI era. Such a narrow understanding of what language learning entails is likely to encourage students to bid adieu to foreign language learning and administrators and policy makers to consider accelerating the elimination of language education programs as AI-powered tools become more accurate and reliable. However, for those who recognize that foreign language learning extends beyond acquiring new linguistic skills to include

a broader spectrum of benefits such as enhanced cognitive abilities, intercultural knowledge and skills, and personal growth, the value of foreign language learning is likely to remain substantial. These benefits are in fact irreplaceable by AI-powered translation tools as they are unable to replicate the depth of cultural understanding or personal development that comes from learning a foreign language firsthand.

In an era where language programs are being cut on college campuses and the importance of language learning is increasingly challenged by the rise of AI-powered translation tools, bilingualism unwittingly faces the risk of being perceived as a resourceful, yet less essential, skill to develop. This may be especially true in a monolingual context such as South Korea where the drive for bilingualism is not as entrenched as it is in linguistically diverse regions. In such cases, appreciation of bilingualism that leads to a commitment to language learning is likely to begin with one's awareness of the full spectrum of benefits associated with bilingualism. In fact, the relationship between learner beliefs and language learning process has been well-documented, highlighting how learner beliefs may impact both language learning process and learning outcomes (Ellis, 2008; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2007). Thus, recognizing multifaceted benefits of learning additional languages is central to advocating for language education as it may inspire learners to value and pursue language education even amidst external changes that challenge its importance.

In light of the evolving discourse on bilingualism and language learning, the present study aims to investigate Korean university students' beliefs about foreign language learning and bilingualism, particularly the benefits they associate with learning and using additional languages. Additionally, the study seeks to uncover whether students' beliefs are influenced by specific individual learner variables, such as area of study, self-rated proficiency in English, the number of applied linguistics or related courses taken. The goal is to identify any gaps or misconceptions that may exist in students' beliefs about bilingualism and provide insights into how different educational backgrounds might shape their perceptions of bilingualism. By doing so, the study intends to inform advocacy efforts aimed at promoting a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of bilingualism among university students in Korea.

In the present study, the terms *foreign language learning* and *bilingualism* are used in close connection to reflect both the process and the outcome of acquiring additional languages. While *foreign language learning* refers more specifically to the process of acquiring a non-native language, *bilingualism* is used here in a broad, inclusive sense to capture the state of knowing and using two or more languages to varying degrees. Following common practice in second language acquisition research (Cook et al., 2006; Grosjean, 2021), the study adopts the functional view of bilingualism, acknowledging that learners at various stages of proficiency and engagement may already be considered bilingual in many contexts. In this way, bilingualism is not viewed as an end state of balanced proficiency in both languages, but as a continuum that includes active foreign language learners. For this reason, benefits associated with foreign language learning and bilingualism are considered essentially equivalent for the purposes of this study, and the two terms are used interchangeably when discussing perceived advantages of acquiring additional languages. Lastly, *bilingualism* is also used as an umbrella term encompassing both bilingualism and multilingualism, in line with broader usage in applied linguistics research (Grosjean, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism

The past few decades have witnessed a growing body of work exploring benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism, ranging from meta-analyses focusing on specific aspects of benefits (e.g., Adesope et al., 2010) to broader systematic reviews that survey empirical studies documenting multifaceted benefits that additional language learning provides (e.g., Fox, Corretjer, & Webb, 2019; Fox, Corretjer, Webb, & Tian, 2019; Valdés et al., 2004). While it is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive overview of the documented benefits, this section discusses some of the key findings identified in previous research, including cognitive advantages in executive functions, delayed onset of cognitive decline, employability, and communicative and intercultural competence.

Since Pearl and Lambert's (1962) findings challenged the deficit view of bilingualism dominant at the time, a substantial amount of work has been dedicated to exploring cognitive benefits of bilingualism, particularly concerning executive function abilities. For fluent bilinguals who use two languages on a regular basis, both languages are always active to some extent regardless of contextual need or conscious intent (e.g., Kroll et al., 2006; van Hell & Dijkstra, 2002). This unique situation requires the constant involvement of the executive control system in bilingual language production to manage attention to the target language while suppressing the interference from the non-target language. Although there is ongoing debate about the impact of this cognitive juggling on executive functions (Adesope et al., 2010; e.g., de Bruin et al., 2015;

Degirmenci et al., 2022; Lehtonen et al., 2018; Van den Noort et al., 2019), several decades of research in support of the bilingual advantage in executive functions suggests that bilingual experience may enhance executive functions such as inhibitory control, attentional control, and cognitive flexibility under certain circumstances. However, the presence and magnitude of the bilingual advantage in executive functions appear to be related to a number of factors including participant characteristics (e.g., bilingual experience, age, socioeconomic status) and methodological issues. For instance, cognitive benefits are more consistently observed in childhood (Bayliss et al., 2003) or later in life (Valian, 2015) but are less evident in younger adults, whose executive function abilities are typically at their peak.

Another bilingual advantage that has gained attention in more recent years is potential effects of bilingualism on age-related cognitive decline such as dementia and mild cognitive impairment. Since the landmark study by Bialystok and colleagues (2007), which reported a 4-year delay in the onset of dementia for bilinguals as compared to monolingual counterparts, there has been growing interest in exploring the role of lifelong bilingualism in promoting a buffer against age-related cognitive decline. The protective effects of bilingualism are hypothesized to arise from the increased executive control effort required for managing two competing languages. Bilingualism, as a form of cognitive training, likely contributes to building cognitive reserve, which refers to the brain's ability to maintain function despite age-related or pathological changes by adapting and compensating for neural degeneration (Stern, 2009). Recent meta-analyses (J. A. E. Anderson et al., 2020; Brini et al., 2020; Paulavicius et al., 2020) in fact suggest that active bilingualism is generally associated with delayed onset of symptoms and diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease by as much as 5-7 years compared to monolinguals. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that nearly 55 million people worldwide live with dementia (World Health Organization, 2021), and there is currently no effective pharmaceutical treatment available. In the absence of such treatments, what is immediately available is preventive measures that reduce risk factors and foster healthy cognitive aging. In this context, bilingualism stands out as a practical and accessible contributor to cognitive health, especially when considering that other ameliorating lifestyle factors such as higher educational attainment, physical exercise, and healthy diet are often conditioned by socioeconomic status (Gallo et al., 2022; Mendis et al., 2021).

Beyond cognitive advantages, bilingualism has been associated with higher academic achievement. Previous studies indicated that students either studying or knowing more than one foreign language outperformed their monolingual peers on a number of standardized test measures: the SAT Reasoning Test (Cooper et al., 2008), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (Taylor & Lafayette, 2010), the General Certificate of Secondary Education (Rutgers et al., 2024). Furthermore, bilinguals tend to outperform monolinguals in additional language learning, both in general proficiency (e.g., Muñoz, 2000) and specific aspects of proficiency including vocabulary (e.g., Kalashnikova et al., 2015), phonology (e.g., Antoniou et al., 2015), grammar (Sanz, 2000), literacy skills (e.g., Kahn-Horwitz et al., 2014) (see Cenoz, 2003; Hirosh & Degani, 2018 for comprehensive reviews). The better performance of bilinguals in additional language learning compared to monolinguals may be attributed bilinguals' greater metalinguistic awareness (e.g., Dillon, 2009), more effective use of learning strategies (e.g., Afsharrad & Sadeghi Benis, 2017), and better management of cross-linguistic interference (e.g., Bartolotti & Marian, 2012).

The emerging line of research on the effects of bilingualism on psychological variables (e.g., higher-order and lower-order personality traits, emotions) suggests that bilingualism has been linked to personality traits relevant to intercultural communicative competence (ICC). While a multitude of definitions of ICC exists (Griffith et al., 2016), it is generally understood as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194) and consist of a number of personality traits. Among them, open-mindedness (an open and unbiased attitude towards diversity) has been consistently related to advanced knowledge or/and use of several languages (e.g., Dewaele & Stavans, 2014; Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Korzilius et al., 2011). Furthermore, individuals with a higher degree of multilingualism tend to exhibit a higher degree of flexibility (the ability to learn from new experiences, adjust behavior according to contingency, and enjoy novelty and change) (e.g., Dewaele & Wei, 2013) and demonstrate greater tolerance of ambiguity (the ability to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable) (e.g., Dewaele & Botes, 2020). These findings suggest that promoting bilingualism can contribute to valuable multicultural personality traits, which are becoming increasingly essential in today's interconnected world and are often identified as valuable student outcomes in higher education.

Finally, bilingualism has been shown to afford positive labor-market outcomes such as higher employment probabilities and earnings. Empirical support comes from research in the new discipline called language economics, which considers language skills as an economic asset—human capital—and posits that additional language learning may be a productive skill in the labor market (Chiswick & Miller, 1995). The existing literature generally supports the view that proficiency in foreign languages may be associated with a wage premium, with increases ranging between 5-34% (Adserà & Pytliková, 2016), and higher employment probabilities (c.f., Ubalde & Heyman, 2021). However, the presence and size of these economic effects vary depending on a number of factors including status of the languages learned (official vs. non-official),

socioeconomic status of individuals (lower income vs. higher income), and ethnicity (Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic bilinguals). For instance, proficiency in official, co-official, or dominant language skills are likely to afford wage premia and greater employment opportunities (e.g., Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003; Stöhr, 2015), while economic advantages of proficiency in non-dominant or minority languages appear less clear.

Students' beliefs about benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism

Despite abundant research showcasing multifaceted benefits of bilingualism and foreign language learning, relatively little focus has been placed on exploring students' perceived values of learning additional languages. For example, Wei et al. (2021) investigated Chinese Mongolian university students' beliefs about multilingualism using seven 5-point Likert-scale items. These items were designed to capture the students' level of agreement with various benefits associated with being multilingual, such as aiding in securing employment, enhancing intellectual capabilities, expanding social circles, facilitating workplace promotion, increasing financial earnings, and broadening knowledge. The study found a very high mean score (4.52 out of 5), reflecting favorable attitudes towards the potential benefits of multilingualism among the Chinese students. Furthermore, these positive attitudes were linked to several individual difference factors, including attitudes toward non-ethnic and ethnic languages, as well as gender. Similar results were found in Haukås et al. (2024), which surveyed Norwegian secondary school students' beliefs concerning benefits of multilingualism using eight 5-point Likert scale items. High scores were observed for belief items related to impact of multilingualism in offering different perspectives, facilitating the learning of additional language, and enhancing understanding of the languages already known. Importantly, several individual difference variables—including having more friends with non-Norwegian home languages, a migration background, and experience living abroad—were significantly associated with stronger beliefs in the benefits of multilingualism, whereas the number of languages learned in school was not. This suggests that students' real-world exposure to multilingual environments played a more significant role in shaping their beliefs than formal instruction alone, highlighting the importance of authentic, experiential engagement in developing a deeper appreciation for multilingualism. Finally, using a qualitative approach, Alsaifi (2024) reported that Arabic university students viewed bilingualism as an advantage and highlighted a number of perceived benefits including improved cognitive abilities, enhanced cultural understanding, and facilitation of additional language learning.

Considering the direct implications that learner beliefs may have for language learning process and outcomes (Ellis, 2008), understanding how students perceive and value foreign language learning can offer valuable insights into their motivations and expectations. For instance, awareness of diverse benefits associated with bilingualism may lead to increased motivation, commitment, and persistence in the learning process, as students perceive language learning not only as an academic requirement but as a valuable life skill that offers numerous personal and professional advantages. In an era where the importance of foreign language education is increasingly challenged by shifts in educational priorities and technological advancements, having a comprehensive understanding of benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism becomes even more essential for individuals to appreciate and commit to language learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To contribute to the existing line of research that explores benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism, the present study examined the extent to which Korean university students were aware of multifaceted advantages of learning additional languages. Additionally, the study sought to uncover whether students' beliefs were influenced by specific individual learner variables, such as self-rated proficiency in English, area of study, number of foreign language education or applied linguistics courses taken. These three factors were of particular interest because they were best considered to reflect Korean students' level of exposure to either foreign language learning experiences or academic content that likely addresses benefits of learning additional languages. For most Korean students, English is the primary foreign language (Paik, 2018), and their exposure to English or any other foreign languages is typically shaped by formal education, standardized testing, and extracurricular programs such as private academies. As such, English proficiency was included as a proxy for students' experience with learning and using a foreign language. Furthermore, students' area of study—particularly whether they were enrolled in foreign language-related majors versus other fields—and the number of courses taken in foreign language education or applied linguistics were included to capture students' academic exposure to research-based perspectives on additional language learning, including explicit discussions of multifaceted benefits of bilingualism.

Overall, the study aimed to identify any gaps or misconceptions that may exist in students' beliefs about the value of

learning additional languages and examine how different forms of exposure to foreign language learning and related academic content may shape students' perceptions. Insights from this research may help inform instructional and curricular approaches that more effectively promote awareness of how foreign language learning enriches our lives in various ways. The research questions (RQs) that guided the present investigation are as the following:

Research Question 1. What benefits do Korean students associate foreign language learning and bilingualism with?

Research Question 2. To what extent do Korean students hold positive beliefs about commonly documented benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism?

Research Question 3. Which learner variables (e.g., area of study, self-rated proficiency in English, and the number of courses related to foreign language education or applied linguistics taken) are strongly associated with students' positive beliefs about foreign language learning and bilingualism?

For these purposes, the study employed a mixed-methods survey design, specifically the convergent design (Sato, 2022), which included both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The Likert-scale items quantitatively assessed the extent of students' beliefs about commonly documented benefits of foreign language learning, while the open-ended questions offered qualitative insights into benefits that students associate with bilingualism.

METHOD

Participants

The present study draws upon data gathered through an online survey, employing snowball sampling to reach a diverse group of Korean students enrolled in a university at the time of testing. Following previous survey-based studies (Isbell et al., 2022; Loewen et al., 2020), multiple techniques were used to obtain a large and broad sample of students across universities. The survey links were distributed through the researcher's academic networks, online student communities, and social media platforms to maximize reach. Participants were encouraged to share the survey with peers, facilitating broader participation through peer-to-peer dissemination. This approach enabled the recruitment of students from a range of academic majors, year levels, and linguistic backgrounds, increasing the representativeness of the sample. The survey data were gathered between November and December 2024 via an online questionnaire distributed by the Google Forms platform (<https://docs.google.com/forms>). Due to the snowball sampling method used, an exact response rate was not available to report. However, a total of 351 respondents completed the study, with a mean age of 21.28 years ($SD = 1.82$). The sample comprised 122 males and 229 females, representing a broad range of academic disciplines (detailed in the Analysis section) across 88 different universities. At the time of the survey, most respondents were in either Year 1 (52.42%, $n = 184$) or Year 2 (28.49%, $n = 100$), while students in Year 3 (9.97%, $n = 35$) and 4 (9.12%, $n = 32$) were relatively fewer in number.

Survey Instrument

The online questionnaire comprised five sections, three of which are pertinent to the present study (see Appendix). The first section elicited participants' socio-biographical information including sex (Item 1-1), the name of the enrolled university (Item 1-2), program (Item 1-3), age (Item 1-4), enrolled year (Item 1-5), self-rated proficiency in English (Items 1-6 to 1-10), and number of courses taken related to foreign language education or applied linguistics.

In the second section, participants were asked to discuss perceived benefits of learning foreign languages in an open-ended format (Item 2-1). The exact prompt provided was “외국어를 습득함으로써 얻을 수 있는 이점은 무엇이라고 생각하나요? 가능한 한 많은 이점을 적은 후 각 이점에 대한 간략한 설명을 적어 주세요 (What do you think are some benefits of acquiring a foreign language? List as many benefits as you'd like and provide a brief description for each benefit).” This allowed them to express their beliefs about how learning additional languages might impact their lives in a positive way.

The final part of the questionnaire included six belief statements (Items 3-1 to 3-6) designed to assess the degree of students' positive beliefs about a range of benefits of additional language learning (see Table 1). This section was intentionally placed after the open-ended question to avoid any potential priming effects that the presentation of these items

might have induced. Of the six items, some were adapted from previous questionnaires (Haukås et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2021), while others were newly created to ensure that the statements collectively reflected key benefits highlighted in previous research, such as cognitive, academic, social, and professional benefits (see the literature review section). Participants were asked to rate these statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In line with Haukås et al. (2024), ‘not sure’ was employed as the middle option instead of ‘neither agree nor disagree’ to address potential issues with interpreting the midpoint (Nadler et al., 2015).

TABLE 1
Statements about Benefits of Foreign Language Learning and Bilingualism

| Item | Statement | Benefit type |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 3-1 | Knowing many languages may enhance your cognitive functions (e.g., inhibitory control, attentional control, cognitive flexibility). 여러 언어를 아는 것은 다양한 인지 기능(예: 억제 조절, 주의 조절, 인지적 유연성)을 향상시킬 수 있다. | General cognition |
| 3-2 | Knowing many languages may help delay the onset of cognitive declines such as dementia and mild cognitive impairment. 여러 언어를 아는 것은 치매 및 경도 인지 장애와 같은 인지 저하의 발병을 지연시키는 데 도움이 될 수 있다. | Brain health |
| 3-3 | The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn a new a language. 더 많은 언어를 알수록 새로운 언어를 배우기가 더 쉬워진다. | Language awareness |
| 3-4 | People who know many languages may be more open, unprejudiced, and positive attitudes towards cultural differences. 여러 언어를 아는 사람들은 문화적 차이에 대해 더 개방적이고 편견 없는 긍정적인 태도를 가질 수 있다. | Open-mindedness |
| 3-5 | People who know many languages may be more inclined to learn from new experiences and adapt to change. 여러 언어를 아는 사람들은 새로운 경험으로부터 배우고 변화에 적응하는 데 더 능숙할 수 있다. | Flexibility |
| 3-6 | People who know multiple languages generally have greater advantages in the job market. 여러 언어를 아는 사람들은 일반적으로 취업 시장에서 더 큰 이점을 가진다. | Employability |

Note. The items were provided to participants in Korean, without the English equivalents.

RESULTS

Students' descriptions of perceived benefits of foreign language learning

To explore benefits that Korean students associated with foreign language learning and bilingualism (RQ 1), student responses to the open-ended item in the second section of the questionnaire were analyzed. A flexible content analysis procedure (Krippendorff, 2018) was used to create a codebook based on recurring benefits associated with foreign language learning in the data. Each response was coded accordingly, allowing for multiple codes to be applied to each response. This process resulted in the identification of a total of 496 benefit codes across 351 responses (1.41 benefit per response). To assess interrater reliability, a second coder independently coded 30% of the data ($k = 105$). The percent agreement across codes ranged from 86% to 100%. Following this, the identified categories were grouped into seven overarching patterns in the data: (1) cognitive benefits, (2) communication/language skills, (3) cultural and global awareness, (4) academic and career advancement, (5) interpersonal benefits, (6) personal development. Table 2 presents a brief explanation of each category and responses from the dataset corresponding to each category.

TABLE 2
Six Coding Categories: Explanation and Sample Responses

| Category | Explanation (with sample response) |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Academic and career advancement | Mentions how foreign language learning enhances their academic pursuits or career opportunities “외국어 능력은 취업 시장에서 중요한 경쟁력이 된다. 다국적 기업, 외교, 통역, 번역 등 다양한 분야에서 외국어 능력을 요구하며, 더 많은 직업 선택과 경제적 기회를 제공하기 때문에 이점이다. (Foreign language skills become an important competitive advantage in the job market. They are required in various fields such as multinational companies, diplomacy, interpretation, and translation, providing more career choices and economic opportunities, which is an advantage.)” |
| Cognitive benefits | Mentions how foreign language learning enhances their cognitive abilities “뇌 발달: 외국어를 배움으로써 뇌 발달에 도움이 된다고 알고 있습니다. (Brain development – I’ve heard that learning a foreign language helps with brain development.)” |
| Communication/ Language skills | Mentions how foreign language learning enhances one’s global language skills, including communication skills 원활한 의사소통: 국제화 시대에 당연히 필요한 능력이라고 생각합니다. (“Smooth communication - I believe it is an essential skill in the era of globalization”) |
| Cultural and global awareness | Mentions how foreign language learning helps better understand other cultures and/or broadens one’s perspectives “외국의 문화와 그 나라 사람들의 생각을 더 잘 이해할 수 있을 것이라고 봅니다. 그리고 그렇게 되면 국가 간의 이해관계에 있어서도 훨씬 유리하지 않을까요?! (I think it will allow for a better understanding of foreign cultures and the thoughts of people from those countries. And wouldn't that also be much more advantageous in terms of international relations?!)” |
| Interpersonal benefits | Mentions how foreign language learning helps in building broader relationships “활동(일자리 등)범위, 소통범위, 친목범위 등 교류할 수 있는 사람들의 풀과 일자리의 풀 등 인생에서의 기회가 확 늘어남. (The range of activities (such as jobs), communication, and social interactions, as well as the pool of people and job opportunities one can engage with, significantly expands, thereby increasing life opportunities.” |
| Personal development | Mentions how foreign language learning facilitates personal growth, including boosting confidence and increasing comfort in various situations “제일 큰 장점은 학습자의 자신감 형성에 도움이 된다고 생각한다. (I believe the biggest advantage is that it helps build the learner's confidence.)” |

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently discussed benefit associated with foreign language learning was enhanced global communication/language skills (33.06%), followed by academic and career advancement (29.64%) and enhanced cultural and global awareness (27.42%). Interpersonal benefits and personal development were noted with much lower frequencies at 4.64% and 4.44%, respectively. Cognitive benefits were the least discussed, with only 0.81%. These results underscore the emphasis on communication and career-related outcomes as primary advantages of language learning, while also recognizing the broader personal and cognitive benefits.

Students' ratings of the benefits of foreign language learning

To explore the extent to which participants held positive beliefs about six statements representing a range of benefits of foreign language learning (Research Question 2), a two-step analysis was performed. First, preliminary analysis was conducted to examine the validity and reliability of the survey items. This process involved performing an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with direct oblimin rotation on the six 5-point Likert-scale items in Section 3 of the questionnaire. The suitability of the data for EFA was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (.85) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2(15) = 854.08, p < 0.001$). The EFA revealed a single-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 3.30, accounting for approximately 54.95% of the total variance. Additionally, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 demonstrated high internal consistency.

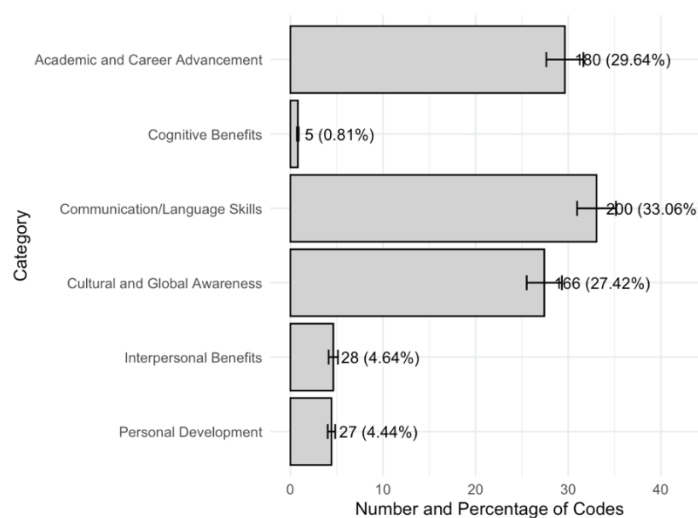


FIGURE 1

Percentage of Codes Applied That Corresponded to Each of Six Overarching Categories

With the validity and reliability of the survey items confirmed, descriptive statistics were subsequently calculated for each belief statement (Table 3). The highest mean score was found for the statement related to employability edge (Item 3-6, $M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.64$), indicating that participants strongly believed foreign language learning provides a competitive advantage in the job market. The two statements related to multicultural personality trait (Items 3-4 and 3-5) as well as the statement about improved language awareness (Item 3-3) received relatively high mean scores above 4, suggesting that participants also perceived foreign language learning as beneficial for enhancing cultural understanding and language proficiency. In contrast, the two statements related to cognitive benefits (Items 3-1 and 3-2) had lower mean scores, with Item 1 slightly above 3 ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.90$), which represented 'not sure,' and Item 2 below the midpoint ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.81$). These results suggest that while participants recognized various advantages of learning a foreign language, the cognitive benefits were perceived with more uncertainty or skepticism.

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics for Six Belief Statements

| Item | Statement | M (SD) | Median | 95% CI |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------|--------------|
| 1 | Knowing many languages may enhance your cognitive functions (e.g., inhibitory control, attentional control, cognitive flexibility). | 3.30 (.90) | 3.00 | [3.21, 3.40] |
| 2 | Knowing many languages may help delay the onset of cognitive declines such as dementia and mild cognitive impairment. | 2.90 (.81) | 3.00 | [2.81, 2.98] |
| 3 | The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn a new a language. | 4.31 (.74) | 4.00 | [4.24, 4.39] |
| 4 | People who know many languages may be more open, unprejudiced, and positive attitudes towards cultural differences. | 4.54 (.70) | 5.00 | [4.46, 4.61] |
| 5 | People who know many languages may be more inclined to learn from new experiences and adapt to change. | 4.10 (.89) | 4.00 | [4.01, 4.20] |
| 6 | People who know multiple languages generally have greater advantages in the job market. | 4.66 (.64) | 5.00 | [4.59, 4.72] |

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

Factors associated with positive beliefs about foreign language learning

To examine factors related to students' positive beliefs about foreign language learning, the present study analyzed the relationship between students' mean scores of six belief statements (from Section 3 of the questionnaire) and the three individual difference factors: self-rated overall proficiency in English, area of study, and number of foreign language education or applied linguistics. The three independent variables were coded as follows: First, self-rated overall proficiency in English was calculated by combining the participants' self-assessments across four sub-skills—speaking ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.15$), listening ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.02$), reading ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.92$), and writing ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.16$)—each rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The resulting composite score had a possible range of 0 to 20, with a mean score of 11.88 ($SD = 3.68$), serving as a continuous variable reflecting general English proficiency. Second, participants' area of study was treated as a binary variable, where “1” indicated foreign language-related majors (e.g., applied linguistics and translation, English education, German language and literature, Spanish language and literature, Scandinavian languages) and “0” indicated non-language-related majors (e.g., engineering, business, sciences). Of the 351 respondents, 81 were enrolled in language-related majors and 270 in non-language-related majors. Finally, the number of courses that respondents had taken related to foreign language education or applied linguistics ranged from zero to 18, with a mean of 2.09 ($SD = 0.27$) and was treated as a continuous variable.

To explore the associations among these variables, a correlation analysis was conducted using Spearman's rho, a non-parametric measure of correlation, due to violations of normality and linearity assumptions required for Pearson's r . Results indicated that students' mean belief scores were positively correlated with area of study ($\rho = .17$, $p = .001$) and number of courses taken ($\rho = .35$, $p < .001$), but not with self-rated English proficiency ($\rho = .07$, $p = .19$).

Next, a general linear model (GLM) was performed to predict mean belief score based on the two independent variables that exhibited statistically significant correlations: area of study and number of courses taken. The analysis utilized a Gaussian family with an identity link function. The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 102.36$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 11.26% of the variance in the mean belief score. Among the predictors, the number of courses taken emerged as a significant predictor, $b = .08$, $SE = .01$, $z = 5.79$, $p < .001$, indicating that students who had taken more courses tended to hold more positive beliefs about the benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism. However, area of study did not emerge as a significant predictor, $b = .002$, $SE = .08$, $z = .03$, $p = .98$. This finding suggests that the quantity of academic exposure through coursework, rather than the field of study per se, played a more critical role in shaping positive beliefs about the value of foreign language learning.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate Korean university students' beliefs about bilingualism, focusing on the benefits they associate with learning additional languages. Recognizing multifaceted benefits of learning a foreign language is crucial for advocating language education, as it can inspire students to appreciate and pursue language learning, even in the face of decreasing institutional support and technological advancements that challenge its importance. For these purposes, the study explored what benefits Korean students associate with bilingualism (RQ1), examined the extent to which they hold positive beliefs about commonly documented benefits of bilingualism (RQ2), and identified which learner variables are strongly associated with students' positive beliefs about bilingualism (RQ3).

With respect to RQ1, the analysis of participants' open-ended questionnaire responses identified six main categories of perceived benefits: cognitive benefits (0.81%), communication and language skills (33.06%), cultural and global awareness (29.64%), academic and career advancement (27.42%), interpersonal benefits (4.64%), and personal development (4.44%). While these themes cover a multifaceted understanding of bilingual advantages, the distribution of perceived benefits clearly highlights the practical and immediate advantages (e.g., enhanced communication and language skills, academic and career advancement, and improved cultural and global awareness) that students associate with foreign language learning. This finding aligns closely with previous studies that observed similar practical emphases among Chinese Mongolian university students (Wei et al., 2021) as well as among Norwegian secondary students (Haukås et al., 2024). As English is considered the primary foreign language for many Koreans, the type of benefit they tend to associate with foreign language learning is likely shaped by Korea's well-documented “English fever” (Park, 2011). Park (2011) argues that English proficiency is perceived as a crucial form of linguistic capital, often linked to employment prospects, socioeconomic mobility, and global competitiveness. For this reason, the dominance of English in Korea's education system and job market may have reinforced the prioritization of pragmatic benefits over interpersonal or cognitive ones. It is equally possible that the lower recognition

of interpersonal or cognitive benefits stems from a lack of exposure to discussions on these topics in and outside of educational contexts. Given that the discourse surrounding foreign language learning in Korea is largely driven by economic imperatives, educational interventions that explicitly introduce the cognitive and social advantages of bilingualism could help broaden students' understanding and appreciation of the full range of benefits associated with multilingualism. For instance, long-term cognitive benefits of bilingualism such as delays in cognitive decline in older adults (Antoniou, 2019; Bialystok et al., 2007) may help students become even more appreciative of learning additional languages especially given that there is currently no pharmaceutical remedy for these age-related cognitive declines.

Next, the ratings of statements regarding language learning benefits (RQ2) demonstrated that Korean university students generally held positive beliefs about the six benefits associated with foreign language learning (RQ2), particularly in relation to academic (Item 3), social (Items 4 and 5), and economic (Item 6) benefits. The quantitative results revealed strong agreement with the qualitative findings that depicted the instrumental advantages of foreign language learning, confirming previous studies portraying foreign language proficiency as a means of achieving economic mobility and international competitiveness (Wei et al., 2021; Park, 2011). However, beliefs regarding cognitive benefits, such as enhanced executive functioning and delayed cognitive decline (Items 1 and 2), were less strongly endorsed. This discrepancy suggests that while students recognized the bilingualism's practical and social value, they may have had limited awareness of its cognitive and neurological benefits. Although scholarly debates persist on the extent of these cognitive benefits (Antoniou, 2019), raising students' awareness of these benefits remains crucial. For instance, greater awareness may encourage students to sustain long-term engagement in foreign language learning, viewing it as an investment in both intellectual and neurological well-being rather than solely a career-enhancing skill.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings highlight the need to enrich undergraduate curricula with explicit instruction on the broader benefits of bilingualism. In particular, instructors of foreign language education or applied linguistics courses could incorporate modules or discussions on research showing the cognitive, neurological, and interpersonal gains associated with multilingualism. Doing so may help shift the prevailing perception of language learning from being solely career-oriented to being understood as a multidimensional, lifelong asset. Activities that expose students to real-world multilingual contexts—such as intercultural exchanges, reflective projects, or readings on cognitive benefits of bilingualism—can also reinforce this message. By fostering an informed understanding of these benefits early in students' academic journeys, educators can help nurture more intrinsic motivation for language learning.

Finally, with respect to RQ3, the number of applied linguistics or related courses taken emerged as the single predictor of positive perceptions of foreign language learning and bilingualism, accounting for approximately 11% of the variance in the mean belief score. This suggests that students with greater exposure to coursework likely to address how additional language is acquired, used, and processed tend to develop more well-rounded beliefs about its benefits. The fact that self-rated English proficiency and academic major did not have significant impact on students' beliefs further highlights the important role of exposure to academic topics typically covered in foreign language education or applied linguistics in shaping positive perceptions toward foreign language learning. These findings align with previous research demonstrating that L2 learners' beliefs about language learning may be shaped by a number of factors including real-world exposure to multilingualism (e.g., social interactions, living abroad) and learning contexts (Haukås et al., 2024; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Future research may consider exploring the impact of specific courses or course topics in fostering more comprehensive and informed views of foreign language learning and bilingualism to better understand how applied linguistics research contributes to shaping students' positive attitudes and engagement with multilingualism. Additional individual difference factors worth exploring include the length of living abroad and the presence of multilingual friends, which were found to be significantly associated with more positive beliefs about multilingualism in Haukås et al. (2024). Replicating these findings with other student populations, educational contexts, and cultural backgrounds would be valuable for assessing the generalizability of the effects of experiential multilingual exposure and for understanding how social and cultural environments shape learners' attitudes toward language learning and bilingualism.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated Korean university students' perceptions of various benefits of bilingualism and foreign language learning, focusing on the types of benefits they associate with it, their overall beliefs, and the factors influencing these beliefs. The findings revealed that while students generally recognize the academic, social, and economic advantages of bilingualism, they exhibited less awareness of its cognitive benefits. Additionally, the number of applied linguistics or related courses taken emerged as the strongest predictor of positive perceptions, highlighting the role of formal instruction in shaping

students' beliefs about bilingualism.

Given the increasing challenges faced by foreign language education—including declining enrollments and the growing reliance on AI-powered translation tools—raising awareness of multifaceted benefits of foreign language learning is more crucial than ever. A broader understanding of these benefits is likely to help students appreciate foreign language learning beyond its immediate practical applications, reinforcing its long-term cognitive, cultural, and professional value. In this respect, fostering such awareness is essential for sustaining student engagement in foreign language learning and promoting linguistic diversity in an era of rapid technological change.

To achieve this, applied linguists and language educators must take on a proactive role in advocating for a more comprehensive view of bilingualism. One approach is to integrate explicit discussions of multifaceted benefits into their courses, ensuring that students understand how language learning positively influences various aspects of their lives. Beyond classrooms, they can contribute through public outreach and policy advocacy to highlight the broader societal advantages of foreign language learning. Collaborations with policymakers, educators, and media can help challenge misconceptions about language learning and reinforce the importance of maintaining foreign language programs. By fostering a more informed perspective on bilingualism, these efforts can help secure the future of language education and encourage a deeper appreciation for linguistic diversity.

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Appendix

Survey: Students' beliefs of benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism

(The survey was originally conducted in Korean but has been translated into English here.)

Section I. Biographical Information

- 1-1. Sex: Female / Male
- 1-2. Affiliated university:
- 1-3. Area of study (major):
- 1-4. Age:
- 1-5. Year: First / Second / Third / Fourth
- 1-6. Have you taken any courses related to foreign language education or applied linguistics? If so, please indicate the number of courses taken in the relevant areas of study: _____
- 1-7. Which of the following best describes your English *speaking* ability?
- Able to express only very basic words or phrases
 - Able to carry out short conversations in daily life
 - Able to describe personal experiences or life using simple sentences
 - Able to discuss/explain specific professional topics or subjects
 - Able to use the language freely in any situation
- 1-8. Which of the following best describes your English *listening* ability?
- Able to understand very basic words or phrases
 - Able to understand frequently used words and expressions
 - Able to grasp the main points of everyday conversations
 - Able to understand the content of long speeches and lectures
 - Able to comfortably understand any type of conversation
- 1-9. Which of the following best describes your English *reading* ability?
- Able to read and understand basic names, words, or phrases
 - Able to read and understand short and simple texts
 - Able to read and understand commonly encountered texts in daily life
 - Able to read and understand long and somewhat complex texts
 - Able to comfortably read and understand any kind of text
- 1-10. Which of the following best describes your English *writing* ability?
- Able to write short postcards or documents
 - Able to write short memos
 - Able to write simple texts on specific topics
 - Able to write detailed texts related to various areas of interest
 - Able to write fluently and flexibly across various genres

Section II. Perceived benefits of learning foreign languages (open-ended question)

- 2-1. What do you think are the benefits of acquiring a foreign language? List as many benefits as you'd like and provide a brief description for each benefit.

Section III. Belief statements

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about additional language learning, using a Likert-scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

- 3-1. Knowing many languages may enhance your cognitive functions (e.g., inhibitory control, attentional control, cognitive flexibility).
- 3-2. Knowing many languages may help delay the onset of cognitive declines such as dementia and mild cognitive impairment.
- 3-3. The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn a new a language.
- 3-4. People who know many languages may be more open, unprejudiced, and positive attitudes towards cultural differences.
- 3-5. People who know many languages may be more inclined to learn from new experiences and adapt to change.
- 3-6. People who know multiple languages generally have greater advantages in the job market.