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## Media Release

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### Bilinguals do it better

A recent study conducted by researchers for the MARCS Institute for Brain, Behaviour and Development has found that overall; bilinguals outperform single language speakers in understanding language and learning new words.

Dr Karen Mulak, who conducted the study in partnership with the National University of Singapore, said most word learning occurred subconsciously.

“When thinking of how we learn words, we might think of consulting a dictionary or having someone explain the meaning directly, but in the real-world, many words are learned indirectly,” she said.

“When we hear a word we don’t know, our mind subconsciously tracks what the possible meaning might be based on our surroundings or the context.

“After a few encounters with the new word, the brain narrows down what the likely meaning is, and in turn we’ve learned a new word. In research, this is called cross-situational word learning.”

The MARCS study compared the performance of single language speakers (monolinguals) and bilinguals in a cross-situational word learning assessment.

The study was the first to demonstrate that bilinguals can learn new words in an indirect or implicit way, and that they are also better at it than single language speakers.

Dr Mulak said although past research on explicit word learning found a bilingual advantage relative to single language speakers, her findings were the first to demonstrate that bilinguals also outperformed monolinguals in a number of word learning tasks.

She said bilingualism was often associated with greater performance on tests of attention, focus, and memory, and that these factors might explain the bilingual advantage over single language speakers.

“This supports the theory that bilingualism fosters a wide range of cognitive advantages that may benefit implicit word learning, and fits with other research that suggests learning more than one language in childhood may benefit overall language development, and may also be associated with other benefits in problem solving and handling complex tasks,” she said.

For more information, go to: <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01218/full>

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