How Learning a New Language Expands Scientific Imagination

Fatima AlSheikh[1,2]

1 College of Natural Science, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States
2 College of Arts and Letters, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States

*alshei13@msu.edu

Abstract

In this paper, I will look into the connection between language learning and scientific reasoning. I will be focusing on how bilingualism, specifically the study of Japanese and English, would enhance creativity, flexibility, and conceptual understanding in STEM fields, especially Physics. Looking into evidence from cognitive science, neuroscience, and educational research, the paper will argue that bilingualism and literature help stimulate the neural structures in one's brain that are responsible for abstract reasoning and executive control – both of which are crucial in physics and STEM, especially in problem solving. This analysis shows that studying two fields which are seemingly unrelated actually provides deeper connections across disciplines while still encouraging analogical thinking. It also broadens one's intellectual horizons. I will be using my personal experiences as a Physics and Japanese double major to illustrate how language learning can sharpen logical and creative faculties that are directly transferable to scientific inquiry.

Introduction

For the majority of people, language learning and physics are often viewed as incompatible fields, often referred to as "disconnected." Language is grounded in expression and culture, while physics is focused on numbers and universal laws. Yet they are both systems of representation that rely on structure, logic, and creativity. As a student of both physics and Japanese, I have found that language study does not compete with scientific reasoning, it actually enhances it. When switching between linguistic frameworks, the brain trains to have a flexible thinking mechanism and can interpret multiple layers of meaning. These skills directly mirror the mental operations needed in theoretical and experimental physics.

Bilingualism and language learning play a huge role in stimulating cognitive processes which catalyse scientific creativity. Language learning also enhances neural flexibility and pattern recognition which are essential in STEM fields. Both language and physics combine logical precision with imaginative interpretation, and by learning a new language, one can deepen their interest in science by transforming how they perceive patterns, systems, and relationships in the physical world.

Cognitive Stimulation in a Bilingual Brain

Language and Science Processing

Recently, cognitive neuroscience research has demonstrated that bilingualism enhances activity in the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex, which are regions that are responsible for executive control, task switching, and problem solving (Bialystok, 2011; Costa and Sebastián-Gallés, 2014). These regions are also heavily involved in complex reasoning and abstraction in physics and mathematics. Managing two linguistic systems by deciding which lexicon to access, inhibiting interference from a different language, and interpreting context is what creates a continuous mental workout that aids in strengthening the neural pathways used for symbolic reasoning.

Bilingual individuals are more likely to exhibit enhanced working memory and superior ability to manipulate mental representations (Marian and Shook, 2012). These are essential skills in visualizing problems in physics. There is an overlapping activation in parietal regions when subjects perform mathematical and linguistic syntactic operations in parietal regions when subjects perform mathematical and linguistic syntactic operations together (Dehaene et al., 2004). This suggests that grammar processing and equation solving share neural resources for structure building and brain development.

Language Learning is a Cognitive Simulation

While language learning seems far away from science, it is a simulation of scientific modeling. For example, when learning Japanese, it is crucial to constantly conjecture the function of particles (*ni*, *wa*, *ga*) in different contexts, and then test this through conversation, and revise them afterwards. This process mimics the scientific method of hypothesis testing. The feedback loop of prediction, testing, and correction help stimulate the prefrontal basal ganglia circuits in one's brain and therefore enhances its adaptability and tolerance for ambiguity (Abutalebi & Green, 2016). The same processes provide physicists with ways to navigate uncertain systems and revise theories when given new data.

With such examples, bilingualism is shown to strengthen one's linguistic abilities in addition to their cognitive skills that support reasoning under uncertainty – which is crucial in fields that require scientific discovery.

Finding a Connection in Disconnection

Challenging Disciplinary Systems

In many modern universities, disciplines are usually separated into different colleges. For example, physics belongs to the natural sciences whereas Japanese belongs to the humanities. However, this separation is not as intellectual as one might think; it is actually more institutional. This is because both physics and Japanese involve decoding patterns, applying rules, and recognizing the changes that occur when these rules break or misalign.

The way polymaths use skills from a certain field to innovate in another is a form of engaging in two distinct disciplines that encourages cognitive diversification (Root-Bernstein, 2001). For instance, in the Japanese language, pattern recognition involved in learning kanji radicals, which are visual components that form characters when added together, translates into enhanced pattern sensitivity when interpreting mathematical and physical components such as graphs, interference fringes, and quantum waveforms.

How Japanese Complements Physics

Japanese, like other languages, trains the mind to think more relationally instead of linearly. The sentence structure is very specific in Japanese, and quite different from the English language. Usually, context and topic are placed before actions and verbs, which encourages the speaker to listen and perceive the whole before the detailed parts, which in a way, mirrors the holistic modeling in systemic physics. In addition, Japanese has a non-phonetic system for kanji characters that requires visual, spatial, and semantic processing. This is quite similar to the mental operation needed in manipulating several representations in physics, especially moving between diagrams, equations, and other conceptual models.

I studied electromagnetism alongside Japanese for a semester. This led me to a rather strange observation: while reading Japanese texts, I was scanning for contextual cues, inferring missing information, and recognizing underlying structures. These skills were the exact same ones I was utilizing in my electromagnetism class. This metacognitive parallel boosted my confidence in tackling multiple abstract physics problems. I believe this is due to the fact that my brain has already been trained in navigating complex systems with many rules through language study.

Logic and Creativity in Grammar and in Physics

Structural Similarities

In many ways, the Japanese language and physics work through elegant systems of rules and exceptions. The grammar used in language studies gives a framework for constructing meaningful expressions, which in a way mirrors the way information and focus on important principles. This mathematical laws provide frameworks for describing nature. The Japanese language has a unique particle system that always reminded me of the syntax of a physical equation. Particles, such as *wa*, *ga*, *o*, and *ni*, help clear the relational dynamics between elements in Japanese, the same way mathematical operators ($+$, $-$, ∇) give a clear understanding of interactions between physical quantities.

To be more specific, in Japanese, *wa* (は) sets the main topic, while *ga* (が) is important in determining the subject, which are such detailed distinctions that require contextual reasoning even though many language speakers do not realize it. On the other hand, in physics, discerning whether a quantity is scalar or vectorial, dependent or independent, utilizes the same contextual logic in the brain, and in both of these cases, a distinct meaning arises from relational structures and isolated symbols.

Creativity Beyond Given Rules

Despite the logical and rational similarities between physics and Japanese, constrained creativity is the most profound similarity between them. The grammar rules and physical laws are what define boundaries, yet within these boundaries, interpretation and imagination are bound to thrive. For instance, literary translation requires constructing meaning while preserving emotional resonance across given systems. This is remarkably similar to the way physicists build theoretical models which result in empirical observations and mathematical abstraction.

For many physicists, Einstein's claim that "imagination is more important than knowledge," does not make a lot of sense. Yet while digging deeper in physics, one finds that this claim emphasizes that creativity is what drives the formulation of new theories. Similarly, composing haiku, which entails capturing meaning in seventeen syllables, embodies the exact creative compression physicists look for when expressing a complex phenomenon in a certain equation.

Interpretation as an Art in Science

Studying Japanese literature has increased my sensitivity to nuance and ambiguity, especially in reading and writing. Having previously read Kawabata's *Snow Country*, where silence and space carry meaning, I realized that even with the lack of words, absence can still be as informative as presence. Null results or symmetries often guide discovery in physics. In both fields, interpretive imagination grounded in disciplined reasoning is extremely rewarded and encouraged.

Bilingualism and STEM Engagement

Language Learning - Motivation for Scientific Curiosity

Foreign language learning is a great way to broaden one's view of the world as it fosters intellectual curiosity which reflects on other fields. This can renew the motivation of many students for science by helping them connect abstract principles to human experience. Bilingual learners develop heightened metacognitive awareness and a stronger sense of cognitive agency compared to others. These qualities are linked to persistence and engagement in STEM fields (van der Walt and Dornbrack, 2011).

Learning Japanese has helped me rethink the ways in which I approach physics problems by providing cultural metaphors for scientific ideas. I have learned about a concept in Japanese called "Zen" that focuses on emptiness, and that stuck with me because of its great similarity to vacuum energy and quantum uncertainty. In addition, the concept of *wa* (harmony) mirrors equilibrium in thermodynamics. These two analogies have evolved my perception of physics. I formerly envisioned it as a purely mechanical pursuit, but I now see it as an aesthetic and philosophical exploration of balance and relationship .

The Cross Linguistic Transfer of Problem Solving Skills

Bilingual education correlates with improved problem solving skills, divergent thinking, and pattern recognition in an individual, which are important skills to succeed in STEM (Adesope et al., 2010). The constant switch between linguistics and physics is a great enhancement for cognitive control and that by itself enables bilinguals to suppress irrelevant skill is quite crucial in physics to navigate complex and multivariable systems.

Interdisciplinary Education and Future Opportunities

Integrating any language and STEM training gives students the chance to be equipped for scientific collaboration and innovation around the world. Any physicist who has the ability to navigate between both technical and cultural languages becomes a great connection between multiple communities.

A New Education Model

Overcoming Separation of Science and Language

The *Two Cultures* lecture given by C. P. Snow (1959), has countered the growing gap between scientists and humanists. My double major in Physics and Japanese is a constant rebuttal to that division placed by others. When engaging both hemispheres of the brain, the analytical and narrative, logical and empathic, many students are able to gain a more integrated understanding of the world.

Fostering similar integration in students can encourage innovation and conceptual translation between disciplines. If more educational programs started teaching scientific writing alongside linguistics and translation, they could create genuine connections between precision in expression and precision in measurement for many students.

Future Scientist and a Cultural Translator

Given the current state of the world – climate change, quantum technology, and emerging questions in AI ethics – there is a strong need for scientists that can think like linguists and humanists. They are more likely to be aware of context, sensitive to ambiguity, and able to communicate across conceptual frameworks. A bilingual physicist embodies this capacity: translation requires deep empathy for the source and the target languages, just as scientific innovation requires empathy for both theory and the natural world.

Personal Reflection

When I first started learning Japanese, I was unsure of what I wanted to study in college. Over the years I developed a marked interest in physics, especially in mechanics and thermodynamics. While balancing both fields, I did not anticipate that language learning would reshape my scientific reasoning. I began to notice similarities in both areas and it made me more determined to study and connect with them. Creating a complex sentence in Japanese was akin to solving for x in an equation since each particle had a specific role that was not necessarily visible. While reading Japanese literature, I was also encouraged to notice the slight shifts in tone, space, or perspective. The more I practiced this, the more I noticed the ways in which physicists infer hidden variables from experimental data.

Surprisingly, my interest in physics created a better understanding and a deeper appreciation for languages as I started to see their structured and dynamic systems. While studying quantum mechanics, I found that its probabilistic nature was similar to how languages can be interpreted differently according to the context. Both fields remind me of the way many things can have different meanings and not everything has an absolute answer. Interpretation can change a lot and not just measurements.

Through my four years in college, I have become confident that bilingualism, multilingualism in my case, is as much a scientific asset as it is a cultural one. It cultivates patience and abstraction and encourages the courage to be lost in uncertainty – qualities that support scientific discovery.

Conclusion

After considerable research, I can say that bilingualism and scientific reasoning are not as distant as they appear: both reinforce one's ability to engage with complexity. In learning Japanese, I expanded not only my linguistic abilities but also my capacity for abstract reasoning, creative modeling, and global thinking. At the same time, mathematical thinking was activating the same neural systems, offering a form of cognitive cross-training that strengthened my work in physics and STEM.

Furthermore, studying what might seem like two unrelated subjects, physics and Japanese, creates unexpected opportunities for deep structural and philosophical connections. Both fields blend disciplined logic with interpretive imagination. They value simplicity, elegance, and harmony, and they share a commitment to uncovering the hidden patterns that link the visible and invisible worlds.

In a time when specialization can narrow one's perspective, being a bilingual scientist broadens the very meaning of intelligence and dedication. It strengthens the ability to listen for meaning rather than only measure it. Thinking in two languages becomes a way of thinking beyond boundaries, and that is an essential skill for all scientists and humanists.

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About the Author

Fatima AlSheikh is a senior majoring in Physics and Japanese. She is interested in language learning, cultural studies, psychology and behavioral analysis, and condensed matter and quantum physics, thermodynamics, and mechanics. As a first-language Arabic speaker who is learning Japanese and Turkish while studying Physics, she has often heard that languages and STEM have no connection. Through this piece, she wants to show how connected they truly are and how both languages and Physics have made her more aware of the world. She hopes people pursue every subject they're interested in and find connections even between things that seem different.