Professor Clive Ballard of the Alzheimer's Society says, 'Education in general can bestow benefits on cognitive function in later life! That does not necessarily mean formal education so much as keeping the brain active through playing musical instruments, reading, doing crosswords or playing board games etc.

New study shows that language skills may also keep the brain sharper for longer. The study conducted by Dr Ellen Bialystok at York University (Toronto, Canada) compared the brain activity of mono- and bilingual speakers. In this particular case the subjects spoke either just English, or English and Tamil, and were of similar social class and educational attainment.

Subjects were tested on vocabulary skills, non-verbal reasoning ability, and reaction times. The bilingual participants responded faster across the age ranges represented, and also showed a slower rate of decline for some of the processes associated with ageing.

It is thought that the bilingualism in general helped to establish neuronal networks in early life that protected the individuals as they aged. Alternatively, the researchers speculate, bilingual people may spend a great deal of their time excluding one or other language in any given situation so having practice at shutting out irrelevant information. The shorter time in responding to the tests by bilinguals gave them an advantage in being able to stick to the task to hand and avoid distraction.

This research confirms what has been known for some time concerning diverse brain activity in early life protecting against memory loss and/or dementia in the later years. Naturally other factors may have significant influences. Numerous studies show that traumatic experiences wipe out memories particularly those associated with the trauma itself.

Research shows that whilst people will never forget the traumatic experience, they are not very good at remembering the details. This is probably due to the high levels of cortisol and adrenalin released as a physical response to the stressful situation.

Clearly we cannot avoid all the many stressors that beset us, but how we deal with these
will have important implications even for our health as we age. It is not too late to establish the protective neuronal networks by engaging in mind-expanding activities, including learning new languages, so *hasta luego hermanos y hermanas* (see you later, brothers and sisters!)!

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