

LEVEL
B2 · Upper-Intermediate

TIME
60 min

SKILLS
Reading · Speaking · Grammar · Vocabulary

Learning objectives

In this lesson, you can:

- understand a research summary about multitasking
- use linking words of contrast and consequence
- explain the hidden costs of switching tasks
- suggest strategies to work with more focus

Key vocabulary

switch · switching costs · productivity · complex · familiar · efficiency · add up · executive control · distraction · focus

Materials

- this worksheet
- article: *Multitasking: Switching costs* (American Psychological Association)

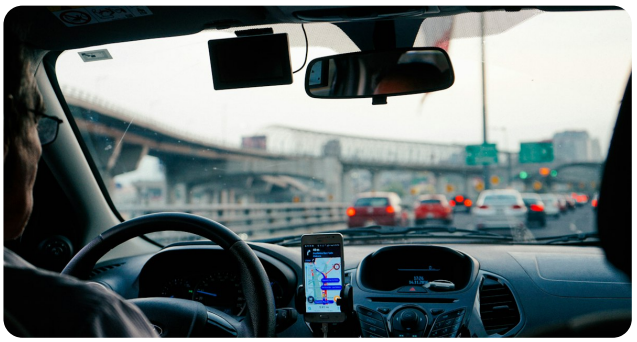
1 Warm up

SPEAKING

Look at the pictures. What can you see? How are they connected to the topic? Then answer the questions with your teacher.



PICTURE A · many screens and tasks



PICTURE B · a driver with a phone

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1. Do you do several things at the same time at work? Give examples.
2. Are you more productive when you multitask? How do you know?
3. What distracts you most during the day?

2 Vocabulary preparation

VOCABULARY

Part A: Match the words with the definitions.

add up (phr v) | familiar (adj) | switch (v) | efficiency (n) | complex (adj) | switching cost (n)

1. _____ to change from one thing to another
2. _____ the extra time you lose when you change from one task to another
3. _____ with many parts; difficult to understand or do
4. _____ known to you because you have done it before
5. _____ doing things well without wasting time or energy
6. _____ to increase gradually until it becomes a large amount

Part B: Collocations with *task* and *focus*. Complete the sentences with the words in the box.

switch | complete | focus | prioritise | interrupt | lose

1. It's hard to _____ on one thing in an open-plan office.
2. I usually _____ my tasks: the most important ones first.
3. Every time I check email, I _____ tasks.
4. Please don't _____ me while I'm writing the report.
5. I need two hours to _____ this task.
6. When the phone rings, I _____ my concentration.

STUDENT'S WORKSHEET

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3 Main input: read and learn

READING · GRAMMAR

The American Psychological Association (APA) summarises research about what happens in the brain when we switch between tasks. Read the first two paragraphs, the paragraph about the 2001 experiments, the section "What the research means" and the first paragraph of "How we use the research".

ARTICLE

Multitasking: Switching costs
American Psychological Association · research summary (2006) · selected paragraphs, about 470 words (3 minutes) · free
https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking

Read the first two paragraphs. Answer: Does multitasking improve or reduce productivity? How do psychologists measure the cost of switching tasks?

Language focus: linking words: contrast and consequence

Research texts connect ideas with linking words. Look at the examples.

Meaning	Linking words	Example
Contrast	although / even though (+ clause) however (new sentence) whereas (compare two facts)	Although each switch costs only a few tenths of a second, the costs add up. Multitasking seems efficient. However, it takes more time.
Consequence	so / therefore / as a result	Switching costs are bigger for complex tasks. Therefore, avoid multitasking on difficult work.

Punctuation: *However* and *Therefore* usually start a new sentence and are followed by a comma. *Although* joins two clauses in the same sentence.

Practice: Complete the sentences with *therefore, whereas, as a result, although* or *however*.

1. _____ multitasking feels productive, it often takes more time.
2. Each switch costs only a fraction of a second. _____ , the costs add up during a day.
3. Simple tasks have small switching costs, _____ complex tasks have larger ones.
4. I check email every five minutes. _____ , I make more mistakes in my reports.
5. Switching tasks can be dangerous while driving. _____ , many places limit phone use at the wheel.

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4 Reading comprehension

READING

Part A: Read again. Are the sentences true (T) or false (F)? Circle.

1. Multitasking with complex tasks reduces productivity. T / F
2. Psychologists measure switching costs by comparing performance with and without switching. T / F
3. Switching costs are larger for simple, familiar tasks. T / F
4. Each switch may cost only a few tenths of a second. T / F
5. Meyer says task switching can cost as much as 40 percent of productive time. T / F
6. The article recommends multitasking on complex tasks to save time. T / F

Part B: Choose the correct answer.

1. What are the two stages of "executive control"?
   (a) Goal shifting and rule activation. (b) Planning and doing.
   (c) Listening and speaking.
2. In the 2001 experiments, participants switched between...
   (a) driving and using a phone. (b) math problems and classifying geometric objects.
   (c) reading and writing emails.
3. Why is task switching dangerous for a driver using a phone?
   (a) The phone battery runs out. (b) Drivers speak more slowly.
   (c) The car keeps moving during a half-second lapse.
4. According to the article, small switching costs...
   (a) disappear with practice. (b) add up when people switch repeatedly.
   (c) only affect young people.

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Part C: Think and answer.

1. Which activities in your job are “complex” and should never be combined with other tasks?

2. Some people say they are good at multitasking. How would you respond, using the research?

3. Suggest two strategies a company could use to reduce task switching.

5 Speaking practice and discussion

SPEAKING

Part A: Choose TWO cue cards. Talk about each card with your teacher for 1–2 minutes.

Cue card 1: My working day

- Interruptions
- Focus time
- Best hours

Cue card 2: Technology and attention

- Notifications
- Chat apps
- Email

Cue card 3: Open-plan offices

- Advantages
- Disadvantages
- Solutions

Cue card 4: Safety

- Driving
- Machines
- Phones

Cue card 5: Managing priorities

- To-do lists
- Delegation
- Saying no

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Part B: Answer the questions with your teacher. Give reasons and examples.

1. How often do you switch between tasks in a normal working day? What causes it?
2. Which tools or habits help you to focus on one task?
3. Is it realistic to avoid multitasking in a modern office? Why? / Why not?
4. How should managers balance quick responses with deep, focused work?
5. Should phones be banned in meetings or while driving? Explain your view.

6 Lesson takeaway and wrap-up

REVIEW

Complete the sentences. Then tell your teacher.

1. Three useful linking words from today: _____
2. The most important finding in the text: _____
3. Although I _____ , I _____
4. Starting tomorrow, I will _____

Takeaway: Every switch between tasks has a small cost, and those costs add up — especially with complex work. Protect focused time for difficult tasks and avoid combining them with other activities.

+ Optional extension / homework

WRITING

Write a short article (150–180 words) for your company newsletter: "Why we should stop multitasking". Use evidence from the APA text and at least four linking words.

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Alternative activity:

Track your task switches for one morning and present the results and two improvements to your teacher in the next class.

References

American Psychological Association. (2006, March 20). *Multitasking: Switching costs*. https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking

Original materials: vocabulary, language examples and exercises were written for NATeacher for B2 learners.

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