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Further Questions and Answers

Multilingualism – Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies

By Lisa-Maria Muller, Research Associate Strand 5 of the Project

Q: What does your part of this project involve?

A: Our strand of the project will investigate the influence of age and the context in which somebody learns a language on the learning progress and process as well as whether some languages are indeed easier to learn than others. We will compare how learners of different ages, ranging from primary school age to late adulthood, go about learning new languages with the aim of informing language-teaching policy. One of our central questions is whether an earlier start really is better when learning languages at school, where students only get very limited exposure to the target language. We are particularly interested in this question as a growing body of evidence suggests otherwise. We are further interested in transferable skills involved in language learning, such as the ability to deduce patterns and regularities, which is very applicable to many other subjects in school. We seek to combine insights from cognitive neuroscience about adolescent brain development and applied linguistics by taking a more holistic approach to the study of language learning.

Q: What are the benefits to society of learning a language?

A: I strongly believe that learning and knowing languages is about so much more than being able to order a beer in a bar. It's about a much deeper intercultural understanding that allows us to reflect critically on our own identity and understanding of the world. When learning another language we realise that the way our native language expresses certain concepts isn't the only way. Let's take the perception of politeness, for example. Some languages, such as English and German, have a preference for indirect requests, which are perceived to be more polite. In Slavonic languages, on the other hand, it is perfectly acceptable to use direct requests. For somebody who has never learned another language and has thus never questioned concepts such as politeness in their own language but rather perceived them as the only way of formulating things, a person with another native language can easily be perceived as impolite simply because they might not conform fully to our conventions. If, however, you have studied a language and gone through the struggle of understanding when to use the German "du" or "Sie" and maybe even committed a small faux-pas here or there, you will be a lot more tolerant toward somebody struggling with politeness markers in English. In other words, I feel that studying languages is not just about communicating in another language but also about understanding your own language better and as such it has enormous benefits, including for English-speaking countries like the UK.

Q: Do you sense different attitudes towards learning languages in the UK compared to elsewhere?

A: Definitely. Attitudes to learning languages appear to be somewhat more negative here than in most other European countries. I think there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, English is the language of international communication and hence people might not necessarily feel the need to learn other languages. Secondly, there appears to be this

powerful urban myth that Brits are somehow not programmed to learn foreign languages, so it's normal to fail. I am still waiting for the scientific evidence to show that there is indeed an anti-foreign-language-learning gene and until we do, I will try and change these attitudes. I believe that the perception of MFL as difficult subjects is partly due to the strong focus on the native speaker standard and, as a result, on pronunciation and grammar. If you believe that you have only succeeded at learning a foreign language once you don't have a foreign accent anymore, you are bound to fail, particularly if you are acquiring the language in school, where you get very little opportunity to practice the target language. If, however, your goal is to communicate fluently with speakers from another country, to be able to read books and watch films in the target language, then this goal seems a lot more attainable and language lessons become more enjoyable. I think it is also important to realise that while globally attitudes toward foreign languages in the UK have been found to be more negative than in other countries, the biggest difference probably is that in other countries, language learning is compulsory for all students throughout their school careers. Regardless of their motivation or ability.

Q: How did you learn the languages you speak?

A: I heard two languages from birth. Growing up in Austria with a Polish mother and an Austrian father meant that I always perceived speaking more languages as a necessity rather than an accessory. How else would I have understood all the wonderful bedtime stories my Polish grandmother told me, or my cousins' banter? And not just understand but respond accordingly? But speaking two languages always meant more to me than just communication. It has always also been a question of identity and of belonging to more than one place, of having a secret key to the ins and outs of another society. It therefore shouldn't be surprising that English quickly became my favourite subject at school when I started to learn it at the age of nine, soon to be followed by French, which I started at twelve and Russian aged fifteen. I continued to study all languages until my Matura, the equivalent to A-Levels here, and not only because I did not have the option of opting out. At university I studied English and Russian, spent one term at Macquarie University in Sydney and one at Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Today I use English, German, Polish and French on a daily basis.

Q: If we roll on four years, what do you hope your project will have achieved?

A: I hope that we will be able to help change attitudes to language learning based on our understanding of how the language learning process and progress differs at various ages, so that learners of all ages can be supported according to their needs to achieve the best possible outcome.

End.