Why should I learn a language?

The Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) is a British intelligence and security organisation responsible for providing signals intelligence and information assurance to the British government and armed forces. It is the UK government's biggest employer of linguists.

What sparked your initial interest in language?
Going abroad when I was quite young with my family, wanting to be able to talk to people, read the signs, the news headlines, the menus so I knew what I was eating – all that sort of stuff.

When you were at school what was your experience of language and learning?
Languages were seen as a real priority and although there was a lot of focus on grammar and methodology, it was made fun as well. The one negative I’d say was that when I was doing languages, friends of mine were streamed off in the science and maths set, which meant that those doing science and maths didn’t really have a chance of doing a language, which was a real shame.

What languages have you studied?
Greek, Latin, French, Russian and I’m currently teaching myself Spanish.

What do you think languages can give you that other subjects can’t?
Languages provide a natural way in, an open door into other countries and cultures. They help you to understand people because you’re reading what they’ve written in their original language and what they are talking about first hand, rather than hearing a possibly ambiguous translation or just not getting the nuances. It’s sort of like body language, so if you’re hearing the first language you’re getting a whole lot more.

How has studying languages helped you in your career?
I suppose from a personal point of view, it gave me a degree which was valued by employers. It has helped me learn other languages – which have been prerequisites for jobs I have done. Languages have given me a whole set of career opportunities that we wouldn’t have had before. It opens up international opportunities but it gives you specific language-related jobs as well.

How have languages been useful in your current job?
GCHQ linguists work every day using their languages on subjects ranging from threats to the UK’s national security to supporting the prevention + detection of serious crime. They’ll use their language skills to piece together snippets of information, combining their language knowledge with the cultural knowledge that you get when you study a language. They’ll then use these snippets and turn those that are assessed as having intelligence value into English summaries, which they’ll send to and discuss with our law enforcement and government customers in Whitehall. For the linguists themselves, sitting in their position, basically if they haven’t got good language skills they can’t do their jobs. Full stop, it’s as simple as that.

Why do you think it’s important to learn languages?
Learning a language enables you to take a wider view of the world and to avoid becoming insular in your approach. We are part of a global market place, we are a multi-cultural country. We work very closely with countries all over the place, not just Europe. We are no longer sitting here in splendid isolation, we are part of that bigger world and we therefore cannot just sit back and expect everybody else to learn English. We need to have a range of languages so we can be on an equal footing.

Why do you think we have such a difficult in this country in terms of getting young people to learn languages?
I think the pressure on the curriculum, with all of the national curriculum subjects, means that schools find it quite difficult because there are so many different competing pressures. There’s a perception that everybody else speaks English which is wrong and sort of lazy, but you can see why people think that as English is a lingua franca throughout the world. And I think, as well, there’s a perception that languages are more difficult, more rigorously academic and therefore maybe you go for the easier option so that you get your A* and get into a university of your choice.

In your opinion what are the benefits of learning a language?
I think, for the individual, it enables you to go abroad with a lot of confidence – you can go and immerse yourself and act as an independent traveller. So it opens doors. I think it’s also brain training, which is useful for loads of other academic skills just because of the way you learn a language. It is continual learning as you are always picking up new things – listening to the radio or reading a newspaper, reading a menu. For the wider UK, I think it is financially beneficial that people have languages for trade, for cultural exchange and it is probably really important for conflict resolution.

What advice would you give to aspiring language learners?
I would say definitely pick a language for GCSE, try and do more than one and, use all those online resources out there to be able to do stuff in your own time. Use your initiative and see what’s out there in and fill in the gaps in maybe what the school is offering you. Take the opportunities when they occur to go abroad and visit other countries – and don’t let people when you are abroad talk to you in English!
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‘Nowadays many young people, in the UK, simply don’t see the point in learning a language. After all, we can already speak, write and understand English, we even think in English, which is a very well established global language. With so many places across the globe speaking a language that young people in the UK already know, what’s the point in learning a new one?’

Secondary-school student Ariella Holdcroft interviewed a diplomat, a journalist, an entrepreneur and others to find out.

In her time at the BBC, Rosie Goldsmith had the opportunity to live abroad in countries such as the USA and Germany and has covered major events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid in South Africa. She has been able to interview many high-profile figures and has also set up numerous cultural events, such as The Language of Italian Fashion and Food for the European Commission. She is also particularly recognised in the UK as an ambassador for international literature and language-learning and speaks several languages having studied French and German at Nottingham University.

Can you tell us about the path you’ve taken up until now with languages?

At a comprehensive school, I studied German, Latin and French to O Level, continuing with French and German to A Level. At Nottingham University I did joint honours in French and German which was quite difficult, yet wonderful, as it was like doing two separate courses. Then I went on my year abroad, half in France and half in Germany, after that I went to live in Germany and the United States so I was always using my languages. Later I began learning Italian, because I have always loved it and wanted to learn it. Languages have totally shaped my life, they have been important for me from the moment I was aware of them.

How did your love of languages start?

I first became interested in languages due to the connection with travel. I remember travelling very early on, camping in Venice for six weeks and befriending a German family, who taught me the numbers in German. In no way was the travel luxurious, but it played a big part in igniting my passion for languages.

Why do you think people in the UK have such a lack of interest in learning languages?

I think we’ve lost the joy of learning languages and linking them with every other part of our lives. The decrease in young people choosing to study a language has been on-going every year. A vital step is to start seeing mistakes we make when we speak a modern foreign language as a positive thing, that represents progression and learning.

In your opinion, what are the benefits of learning a language?

There’s a crisis in European language learning, I think it has not been made popular enough, I do not feel that young people are given the opportunity to see how you can enjoy your life, get better jobs and travel more, how you can be less insular, if you can speak a language. For any job you have to present the skills needed, but the ability to speak or learn a language shows so many skills.

Why do you think languages are so important?

I believe, as do many others, that we have to be part of a wider international culture in order to be better educated, to be better civilised, to have better business and better economies. It’s not just about travel; it’s also about our minds and making decisions.
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Julia Higgins is a polymer scientist based at the Department of Chemical Engineering at Imperial College London since 1976, where she is Emeritus Professor and Senior Research Investigator. She was educated at Somerville College, Oxford where she was awarded Master of Arts and DPhil degrees.

What was your experience of language learning at school?
We learnt French and Latin. Latin is a very good basis for understanding quite a lot of other languages and we were taught Latin like a living language – we spoke it, we acted out the verbs. I find that by having Latin and French, I can understand bits in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. I can’t speak them because I don’t know the grammar but I can understand a lot.

I lived in Germany for a while and I worked in Grenoble at a French-German-British research institute and I went to German classes. Although I can’t speak German as well as French, I can speak enough to go into a café and pass the time of day talking to somebody and I just find that’s such a pleasure to be able to do that.

How has studying language helped you in your career?
The communication. I worked in France for four years in two different laboratories and I have maintained extremely good relations with the French colleagues that I had there and part of that is that I made an effort to speak the language. Now most scientists have to speak English because so much information is published in English (and Americans use English). But if you want to live in the country and spend time around people and get to know people, you need to speak the language. So for me it enriched the experience of living in the country and it helped my relationships with the other scientists.

How are languages useful for scientists?
It helps the collaboration, the networking, the interaction you need to communicate with people in science. Having said that, you can’t learn all the languages there are, but if it’s a country where you are going to have regular relationships then being able to speak the language is a good thing. In my experience, once you can speak one other language it becomes easier to learn other ones. You understand how to communicate in another language: you can communicate at a very simple level once you grasp it. You can use single words, you can use your hands – all those things.

Why do you think it’s important to learn languages?
I just think it makes the world go round better. Understanding how language works is quite useful so it’s a piece of culture, but I think it also helps you to understand where misunderstandings can arise. If you are going to work closely with people, it’s quite important to understand how their language works. I’ve had research students work with me in university from many countries and when they start to speak English of course they’re going to make mistakes and it is useful to understand that their language works differently. For example, we use the definite article (eg the) and some countries don’t use the definite article so when those people write English they leave it out and it looks very peculiar. If you understand why they make those mistakes, you can help them to see where the problem lies.

In your opinion what are the benefits of learning a language?
It helps you to write better in your own language if you know a little bit about how language works but mainly it’s about communication with people from other cultures. But once you learn one language it’s much easier to grasp the basics of another language and it means at the very least saying “hello” and “good morning” and “please, can I have two beers” just makes it a lot more pleasant.

So why do you think we still have a problem in this country where young people don’t want to learn a foreign language?
First of all they can’t see how they would use it and secondly for some reason languages have the reputation of being difficult and people want to get good results to carry them on to their future career. I think not enough people do physics or mathematics because they think they have a reputation of being difficult but at least with physics and maths, I think it’s clear to people how they could be useful to them whereas with languages that’s not currently the case. But basically learning a language increases life’s enjoyment – if we could only get that over to more people!

What advice would you give to aspiring language learners?
Go out there and speak, stop being frightened! A long time after my O Level, I went to work in France. Eventually there was a sort of transition point where I stopped being frightened of getting it wrong and just used my bad French to communicate. And if you can do that once, it’s a sort of transition point and you say, “To hell with this, I’ll just try!”