

'Can you understand all that?' – Expanding horizons of a Scottish language learner

Nicola Malcolm

First year student, Heriot-Watt University

When discussing our subject choices at the start of sixth year, my statement of “I’m doing French, German and Spanish” was always met with much astonishment. “What, all three languages at Advanced Higher? You’re joking, right?” most of them said. That’s me alright, always one for making a big impression.

Of course, I simply chose to study languages as I cannot imagine myself ever doing anything else. It’s not like it’s the only thing I’m good at – I could do science, or music or geography – but to me they weren’t exciting. As a prospect, doing languages was thrilling, a living subject, constantly changing and one where you could learn new things every day and from all sorts of places.

To be truthful I’ve not always wanted to become a linguist. Like every other little girl I just wanted to be a ballet dancer or a nurse. I did not know any linguists, nor did I know such a job existed until I was quite a bit older. However, I did always enjoy French at school; I was good at it and it was fun to learn something so different from the usual things we had to do.

The crucial moment came one day not long after I had started High School, when I was in class, and one of my teachers decided to show us all a video which she had taken whilst on a study trip to Spain. This concept was, to me, very exciting, and I was desperate to find out more. I couldn’t help imagining all the amazing places languages could take me. It was at this point that I chose to study both French and German at Standard Grade level.

Classmates often made a joke of not being able to understand a word modern language teachers were saying but further up the school you suddenly realise what a wonderful skill they possess. Being able to speak other languages seemed a very exciting and impressive thing to do with your life. From the beginning I have been in awe of the skills of languages teachers in the school and fascinated by the fantastic stories of where their languages have taken them and the adventures they have had.

After doing some investigating about the many careers I could have with foreign languages, I decided to take them to ‘Higher’ level and also picked up Spanish in the form of an accelerated beginners’ course leading to sitting Higher at the end of the year. For some this was a real struggle, but personally I enjoyed it. It was really interesting learning a whole new language and seeing how it related to others.

The higher up the levels I progressed, the more interesting everything became. It was at Higher when I really began to thrive. Coming from an environment where it was funny to have no idea what was being said, suddenly we were all in competition not only to get the best marks but to know the most and to be able to speak the most fluently.

This pattern continued into Advanced Higher, only in a slightly different way. I was very lucky to go to a school which allowed small classes to run. In the case of Spanish and German, I was getting one-to-one tuition. Suddenly I was no longer striving to keep up with classmates – I was doing my best to keep up with the teacher: someone who had been studying languages for longer than my lifetime.

Advanced Higher was totally different to anything I'd experienced before – no more regimented learning or homework. It is open for you to be as good as you want to be. Although I struggled to motivate myself at first, towards the end of the course I started to really like this way of learning.

Some days classes were not like classes at all. We would watch a DVD – with the subtitles off, naturally – or look at an interesting topic on the Internet or, most days, just sit and chat away in another language. It was the first time in school where every lesson was not aiming for some sort of exam preparation. I spent most of my time learning things about other cultures and traditions, and the language seemed to develop naturally. This informal atmosphere unique to Advanced Higher creates an opportunity for confidence to grow. In a recent trip to Nice with friends, I found I was quite happy to make unusual requests in restaurants and was able to have a bit of a joke with the owner in the hotel – something I wouldn't have dreamed of doing last summer.

What I particularly liked about doing Advanced Higher Languages was that it allowed me to study topics that mattered to me – the environment, poverty, immigration. I have also always enjoyed English at school. Again, the Advanced Higher Languages course incorporated this excellently. Particularly from my German teacher, I learned most of what I know about English grammar.

Of course, I must point out that doing three Advanced Highers is by no means a walk in the park! It involves a lot of personal study, and the work you can do to improve is endless. Again, not being one for taking the easy route, I took on a large amount of S6 responsibilities, including one of the biggest jobs: the S6 Yearbook, which left me with even less time to keep up with work.

I would often have to catch a few moments sitting in our sixth year area to read a book. However, when I saw people staring at the words in disbelief, asking "Can you understand all that?", it made me smile, and always reiterated to me what an impressive thing languages is to do with your life.

Now that I am about to start university, I am feeling much more relaxed knowing that my studies at Advanced Higher will most likely have given me a bit of a head start. Not only has the content of the Advanced Higher course greatly widened my knowledge, but the independent learning needed for Advanced Higher level has also prepared me for studying at University.

I have recently accepted a place at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh on the Interpreting and Translating course. The course focuses on each of the three different types of interpreting – liaison interpreting, conference interpreting and simultaneous interpreting. The latter is what interests me most. To work for the European Union or the United Nations would be the ultimate for me – being the vital link for all the important discussions between such powerful people.

Of course, there are a wide number of possible careers in languages as international communication has become ever more important in today's world. Speaking to the many wealthy business people who come to stay in the hotel where I work as a waitress, I have come to realise what a vital role linguists play in the business world. I have heard of how their interpreters follow them wherever they go in Europe – necessary for all business deals and arrangements to take place, they organise meetings and enable discussions to take place by communicating between the two parties concerned. The feeling that these business people have conveyed to me is that their interpreters are one of the greatest assets to the company, and that they are therefore able to demand any fee. Linguists make the international business world turn. I sincerely doubt that all languages apart from English will die out even within my lifetime.

It is for this reason that I believe more British people should be learning a second language, which is undoubtedly a great asset in any job. We can all learn so much from the people in other countries all over the world.

I remember going on holiday to France and being desperate to understand what was going on and be able to chatter away just like everyone else. This feeling stays with me today, except that now my target is to learn Dutch! To me, this is the interesting thing. Learning languages, in a general sense, is an endless process. No one could ever learn all of the many languages that exist, nor can anyone ever know a language completely inside out.

Perhaps this is what others find frustrating. Admittedly, learning a language is a very long and drawn out process. I myself have not begun to see any noticeable results until recently. So many people take the easy route, asserting boldly that they don't need to bother learning another language "because everyone speaks English anyway."

Possibly we need to spend more time picking up the language naturally through the media – games on the Internet, foreign versions of popular films, cartoon books. Isn't that, after all, why many Europeans are so good at English?

If only school pupils could get past those initial stages of having to learn lists of words and sitting awkwardly in class, feeling too embarrassed to speak; they would get to see what learning a language is really like.

I have gained some wonderful experiences through the Languages Department, for example being involved in the school exchange four times. This led to me going to stay with a French family for a week and a half, and it was one of the best experiences of my life. I loved being immersed in the French language and culture.

Even within the school I have had great fun learning languages, holding a French lunch one afternoon or making our own Gazpacho on the last day of term!

The misconceptions surrounding the learning of another language need to be set right. To me, being able to speak English – one of the most complex and widely spoken languages in the world – is a personal advantage, not an excuse not to learn another language.