



Continually Expanding Horizons

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Abstract: Having written an article for the Scottish Languages Review before beginning my higher education degree back in 2007, I reflect on my experiences of studying French and German at university level, both in Scotland and abroad. I have found that the skills learned at Advanced Higher have helped me get a head start in learning languages and that living abroad has been invaluable to me, both as an individual and as a linguist. Despite the fact that the job market is tough, and that few jobs seem to be specifically designed for those with languages at a highly specialised level, I have found that being one of relatively few Scottish linguists has indeed taken me down an interesting and exciting path.

Keywords: Advanced Higher, ERASMUS, languages at university, specialised language services

Introduction

Five years ago I was tasked with thinking about my language learning for an article for the Scottish Languages Review (Malcolm, 2007)¹. At the time I had just finished my Advanced Highers and was beginning university, full of enthusiasm for what might be considered an unpopular career path. Now, after having survived an intense four years at university and started off in the business world, it is time to reflect again – and to see whether my choice to become one of relatively few Scottish linguists was the right one.

University

Shortly after writing my first article, back in 2007, I started an Interpreting & Translation course at Heriot-Watt University. I had been anxious in terms of where my level might lie, as I had heard from various people what a tough course it was and knew that there would be students there who had lived abroad or been brought up bilingually. Yet to my surprise, I needn't have worried. The required entrance qualifications were only Highers, but I found that the extra knowledge and experience of producing my own written and spoken language gained at Advanced Higher put me and other students on par with those from more multilingual backgrounds.

The learning at university, even in first year, was more intense than I had ever experienced. We had considerably more to do than students in other departments, and sometimes it felt like too much. As I highlighted in my last article, the fact that learning a language is a never-ending process can be slightly overwhelming. However with hindsight, I feel that getting to grips with such a vast and tricky area of study has

¹ SLR Issue 16: <http://tiny.cc/SLR16>

prepared me for pretty much anything! Outside of university, I became involved in some of the planning for the new Scottish Languages Baccalaureate, and found myself desperate to emphasise how important it is that we find a more in-depth way to teach languages if we are to keep up with other nations.

Third Year Abroad

By third year it was time for the much-anticipated year abroad. Simultaneously one of the toughest and best times of my life, the ERASMUS experience is something I would recommend to every student, not just those studying languages. Not only did it provide a year of variety and excitement (something my friends spending the full 4 years at their home universities deeply envied), it also allowed me to mature and become highly independent as well as experiencing culture in an entirely new way.

My first placement was in Grenoble, France. When I arrived my accommodation was – to put it mildly – not of the standard I was used to. I had to go to the university to get registered and there was so much paperwork and organisation I thought “what am I doing here?!” Yet those six months living in my ramshackle student halls and trying to keep up with the home students in an entirely new environment were the most entertaining and educational of my life. I took a number of very interesting classes, including some translation classes for exchange students and more in-depth mainstream classes such as linguistics, lexicology and specialist translation. However, I found that most of my learning was done outside of the lecture hall, simply interacting with other people. One flaw that some people notice in the ERASMUS experience is that the foreign students tend to stick together, which is entirely due to human tendencies to cling on to people in the same boat. However, for me this actually turned out not to be a disadvantage at all. I was living with a whole mix of people, primarily from Italy but also from Poland, Spain, Lithuania, Germany... Luckily everyone was keen to learn French, so that was our common language. Most of my friends were medical students who came with no experience of learning French at all and left being fully conversational. This was when I realised that everyone can and should learn a new language. I began speaking French all day every day, and because I had already studied correct French I simply needed an opportunity to increase my fluency, meaning that it didn't matter that I was conversing with non-native speakers. I bumped into a friend in the street while my family were visiting and they were astonished at how I was able to switch to French and start chatting away so nonchalantly! I love exchanging stories with friends about the first time we dreamt in French or the first time we spoke to an unsuspecting English-speaking family member in French without even realising. We took turns at making dinner and giving each other a taste of our favourite national cuisine, sat eating until midnight, went on weekend trips together, and I even learnt some Italian too. I would say that this was the first time I have ever felt “European”, as I realised how much I had in common with all of my new friends, despite our cultural differences, which we spent hours discussing.

I enjoyed it so much I was loath to go to my next placement. But it was part of the deal, so in March 2010 I turned up in Saarbrücken, Germany with a fear of trying to speak German after all that time speaking mostly French. It took a few weeks but I soon got into it. This placement was slightly different. I, like most others from my university, found it more difficult to integrate in the second semester as most other students do just one whole-year placement. Nevertheless, I still managed to fit in plenty of travelling and used this placement to immerse myself more in the classes I was taking. Despite not having to take a large timetable full of courses due to having a project to write, I decided to take the opportunity to take some of the specialised classes that German universities are well known for. I took classes in technical, legal and financial translation, and they have proven to be completely invaluable in my career so far.

The Final Year – and Beyond

So when I arrived back in Edinburgh I was raring to go into my fourth and final year. Yet we were all in for a shock. We were all now at ease with using our additional languages, able to understand and be understood without putting in too much thought. However, we now had to force our brains to reverse back a couple of steps. That is to say, in order to translate or interpret, I had to force myself back to thinking about the meaning of what was being said or written in English, rather than just switching to the French or German part of my brain and going on auto-pilot. There was so much to learn in terms of the in-depth issues and topics on which we would base our practice, and then there was the pressure and stress of conference interpreting. As mentioned before, I believe that the intensity – despite being a heavy load at the time – has prepared me for most things life could throw at me.

Trying to find a job after graduating was not easy, as was the case for everyone. I was lucky to have studied German (almost all of the people I know that found a job relatively quickly studied German as one of their languages) and managed to get an internship with a translation agency in Leipzig starting immediately after graduation. This very full-on experience allowed me to learn the ropes of the industry at the same time as further improving my German. When I left university I still felt that French was my stronger language, but now, having dealt with a variety of both every-day and extraordinary requests on a daily basis for a year and a half, I feel totally at ease with German and wonder what all the fuss was about! After six months in Leipzig I returned to Edinburgh to work for the same company, before leaving in July this year and standing on my own two feet as a freelancer².

If I am honest, I had initially hoped to find a job where foreign language communication featured heavily but was not the main task, as I would like to explore other things that I might be good at. However, employers are looking for people who specialise in a specific field – business management, law, or marketing – as their main area of expertise and who also happen to speak two or three languages. It's almost as if they

² <http://www.nevislanguageservices.co.uk>

have realised how important languages are for their success, yet there are no candidates to fill the posts. In the UK languages are still an almost niche field, not an essential component – like IT or interpersonal skills – for success in one’s career, meaning that people that combine one of the skills above with one or more languages at a very high level are not as common as in other countries.

At one point, I thought that if I could go back in time, I would study a language plus another more “mainstream” subject. However, I have come to realise that I possess a very specialist skill that not many have, and that for now the gap in language skills can work in my favour as a provider of language services. I now have a business name and a steadily growing base of clients in various locations. As well as translation and proofreading, I have also decided to branch into my other passion of teaching and tutoring. After all, what kind of person would I be if I didn’t pass on my knowledge and help boost our essential language skills as a nation? So to go back to my original question at the beginning – yes I do feel I have made the right career choice in becoming a professional linguist. Being in full control of what I do, taking on tasks that I enjoy and providing my very best quality every time – how many people can claim to be in such an exciting position as I now find myself in?

References

Malcolm, N (2007) 'Can you understand all that?' – Expanding horizons of a Scottish language learner, *Scottish Languages Review* 16. Online: http://tiny.cc/SLR16_Malcolm (Accessed 21 May 2013)