

# Review

## Why study languages? (A review)

Original work by Gabrielle Hogan-Brun published by London Publishing Partnership 2021

Reviewed by Robert Williams

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I'm a language teacher like most of you. Do we really need to read a book about why we should study languages? Yes, we do. Why? Because it explains how to motivate students to want to study languages and shows teachers how to engage students and motivate them to learn languages and indeed motivate us as teachers of languages in our work.

Part of a series of books published by the London Publishing Partnership, including titles on history, mathematics and geography as well as languages, the book is aimed primarily at students to encourage them to take languages seriously as a major employment advantage as well as a cultural interest and even, according to scientific research, a way of improving brain power. Practical, informative and readable, Gabrielle Hogan-Brun offers useful advice and information to all language teachers, backed up by a number of stories of people inspired by learning languages.

The book has seven chapters, simply and clearly written with a beautiful and clear presentation (credit to the publishers), plus a personal postscript describing the author's language learning adventures

in Denmark and an explanation of key concepts and endnotes. There isn't room for an index, which would have been nice. The seven chapters cover why study, multilingualism, whether language study is right for you, what language study can do for you intellectually and career-wise, what you can do with language, how to study languages and where to look for courses.

Chapter 1 discusses the key issue, *Why study languages?* Hogan-Brun identifies three main language learning opportunities – school, university and, in later life, after schooling. A foreign language opens up career opportunities in international companies and organisations, like the UN, but is also an excellent way of developing mental and social skills. Speaking more than one language exercises your brain, helps develop reasoning flexibility and critical thinking skills and even leads to better overall health and well-being. It also helps you become a better communicator both in your mother tongue and in the foreign language you are learning and gives you a considerable advantage in education and employment. Learning a foreign language also inevitably puts

you in touch with the native speakers' cultures. A leading restaurateur in London learned Spanish, lived in Mexico, learned the importance of food and Mexican cooking and opened a chain of Mexican restaurants selling Mexican style street food in the UK called *Wahaca* (the phonetic spelling of the Mexican state of Oaxaca). This is just one of the wonderful stories and anecdotes illustrating the value of foreign languages. Citing *metrolingualism*, a term coined by Alastair Pennycook and Emi Otsuji, she points out the proliferation of languages in a multicultural city like London, UK where as well as the languages you might expect you will also hear Turkish, Somali, Tamil and Farsi.

Chapter 2 asks *How multilingual are we?* At one level, suggests Hogan-Brun, we all have a degree of multilingualism due to the loan words we import from the people, products and countries we deal with. Also, increasingly, we are becoming multilingual nations. Many countries have more than one official language (Singapore has four, South Africa eleven, India 23 and Bolivia 37, the highest of any country in the world). However, as Hogan-Brun points out, there is still an insistence on 'mother tongue' and some resistance to other languages – 'the cultural othering of other languages' – as she describes it. Nevertheless, she clearly feels that multilingualism is the future as she charts the rise of Mandarin Chinese as an international language alongside French, Italian and Spanish.

Chapter 3 examines the arguments why people say they can't or don't want to learn languages and notes the scientific research which shows that bilingual children tend to perform better across the curriculum, and neuroscience shows that bilingual brains are both denser and more pliable than monolingual brains.

In Chapter 4 entitled *What can languages do for us?* Hogan-Brun surveys the advantages of language learning in careers and personal experience, citing the experiences of leading chefs, journalists, novelists and sportswomen. She also mentions a number of international actors who are multilingual, including movie stars such as Jodie Foster, Kristin Scott-Thomas, Christoph Waltz and Natalie

Portman. She also explores the world of those who invent languages for literature, TV and the movies, such as in *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Star Trek*. She goes on to cite famous inventors and political leaders such as Gandhi, Engels and Marx and Cleopatra, the last Pharaoh of Egypt, who reportedly spoke ten languages.

Chapter 5 approaches the argument for languages personally by asking *What can you do with languages?* Once again, she follows the careers of real people, using examples of graduates who have found better jobs due to their knowledge of a foreign language, including in diplomacy, the civil service, in public life and in international business.

Her interviewees agree with her that knowledge of the language is key to understanding the local culture. It enables users to have the local touch and be culturally sensitive to the way people think about and do things and also understand cultural references in the language itself. Knowing and respecting a business partner's culture goes a long way to establishing trust and knowledge of even a little of the local language will help build good relations. Graduates in engineering are in an especially strong employment position if they can speak a second language, especially in international construction or infrastructure projects.

Communication is another area where language knowledge is important, especially to avoid errors in advertising and publicity. Hogan-Brun cites the Scandinavian Electrolux company, who launched a new vacuum cleaner in the United States with the slogan, '*Nothing sucks like an Electrolux*'. The aim was to demonstrate the power of the Electrolux to suck up dirt. Unfortunately, the word 'sucks' also means 'very bad' in US English. So, the slogan actually told the potential customer, '*Don't buy this product. It's terrible!*'. As Hogan-Brun summarises, '*In virtually all areas of work, being multilingual is an advantage*'.

Chapter 6 explores how you can actually go about learning a new language. Hogan-Brun identifies three types of learner: the idealist, the pragmatist and the reflective 'perseverer'. The idealist is drawn to a language through intuition and personal enthusiasm, they 'fall in love' with a language

and the culture of the community that speaks it. The pragmatist learns a language to do a job. Hogan-Brun cites the example of Matthias Maurer, a German trainee astronaut. He wanted a position on a Chinese space station so he studied Mandarin Chinese in order to prepare himself. The tennis star, Martina Navratilova, is a good example of the reflective 'perseverer'. She admits that in the early years of her international career in the US she found English difficult. Her mother tongue was Czech. She believed, rightly, that an ability to speak English was going to be important to her career and she thought about it (reflective) and never gave up learning (persevere).

Hogan-Brun also offers a fourth type of learner, the one who falls in love with a speaker of the language and learns it to communicate with him/her.

An important part of the language learning fraternity is the self-study student, described by Hogan-Brun as the 'self-driven' learner. She lists a number of techniques self-driven learners use to study successfully. They are: note important words; learn the essential structures; practise useful phrases; study regularly, frequently and consistently, dividing the material into manageable chunks; and immerse yourself in the culture of the language you are learning.

The final Chapter 7 looks at ways of studying languages at schools and university and related educational organisations. Although focused on UK resources, the important points made are valid for all schools and universities, and especially, build-

ing employability skills through the mastery of a foreign language. In a postscript, Hogan-Brun describes her own experiences learning Danish while on sabbatical in Denmark.

So, how will this book help language teachers? First and foremost, it is a great motivator, sharing immense amounts of fascinating information combined with the experience of adult learners to entice both 'tired' language teachers and students and adult learners. It offers lots of practical advice on learning psychology and techniques and shows how mastery of another language can improve your brain, enhance your lifestyle and even help you live longer. And, of course, it shows how learning foreign languages can improve corporate and public service employment opportunities and promotion in our global economy.

In conclusion, I can't do better than cite the comment of Baroness Jeanne Coussins, Vice-president of the Institute of Linguists and co-chair of the British All-party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages. She says, *'I defy anyone to read this book and not end up passionate about the importance and the pleasure of languages. With a combination of research, statistics, anecdotes and human interest stories and interviews, it is precisely targeted to its main audience and their parents. If you still believe that (your native language) is enough, prepare to be disabused'*.

I agree and can only add it is a great resource for teachers wishing to stimulate their classes and even themselves.

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