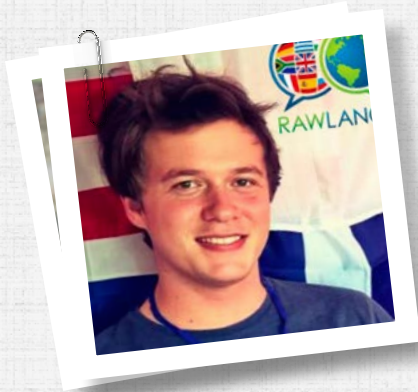


Why should I learn a language?

'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.



Alex Rawlings
Language teacher,
blogger and polyglot

Alex Rawlings, from London, started language learning from a very young age, initially choosing to learn Greek and then French and German. Since then, he has learnt various other languages, including Dutch and Italian. He went to Oxford University where he studied German and Russian. He has since studied Hungarian and Serbian and is considered to be Britain's most multilingual student after winning a competition run by Harper Collins.

What do you think languages can give you that other subjects can't?

The ability to speak a lot of different languages opens a whole new world to you that you never realised was there before. Simply because you can form friendships with people that you originally you wouldn't have been able to communicate with, you can hear stories that otherwise you'd never have even heard. All sorts of work opportunities follow on from that, for example to work with people overseas and even with people within your country that speak different languages. These are all the kinds of things that I've had as result of language and I think all of that has shaped the person I am today and given me an extremely broad world view.



In your opinion, how can we encourage young people to learn foreign languages?

I think we've failed young people that love languages, what we've failed to do is to put the case to them that it doesn't matter what they want to do in life, and what their strengths and weaknesses are, learning a foreign language can only help you do that. I think that languages get unfortunately swept up in the school system into being defined as another subject, which can discourage students. We need to move away from languages as a school subject and rethink the way that we present them in school. I certainly think it should not be presented as an option, but as a necessity, that every single adult or teenager in this country is conversationally fluent in a foreign language.

How would you say languages can help young people in their future careers?

Nowadays we live in times of extreme uncertainty, so no one really knows what's going to happen tomorrow. The one thing you can do to make sure that you do have a bright future and you do have options is to gather as many skills as you can. In my opinion there is nothing that demonstrates self-discipline, determination, study skills and the ability to concentrate more than learning a language.

Why should I learn a language?



Lucy Ash
BBC broadcast
journalist

Lucy Ash is a senior broadcast journalist for the BBC. She began her career as a producer in Moscow in 1990 and 1994 she returned to London to join BBC Radio 4's Euro file, reporting mainly from Russia, Eastern Europe and France

What sparked your initial interest in languages?

My mum is an ardent Francophile – she just loves everything about France but she can't speak it very well. She decided that she was going to make us all learn French from quite early on. So I got sent to stay with a French family every summer from the age of 12 to 16. I must admit sometimes I used to say "mum do I really have to go?" but eventually I got to the point where I started thinking in French and I didn't even realise I was doing that!

Russian is the other language I speak. I wasn't planning on doing Russian at school but the Russian teacher was just great and she was a really good story teller who told loads of stories about how she grew up in a tiny village. I didn't do Russian at university, I did English, but I carried on doing Russian conversation classes just to keep it up. Then when I left university I went and lived in Moscow for a year because I thought, if I don't speak it every day I'll forget it because it is quite a complex language and still now, although I'm fluent I make a lot of horrible grammar mistakes.

What do you think languages can give you that other subjects can't?

I think it gives you an opening into another world. I think you can capture the texture and the flavour of a place if you speak the language. You can be more intimate with people, you can share their jokes. You just feel that you've really got inside the skin of a place when you speak their language.

When I go to a country I try to learn two or three phrases, e.g. 'thank you', 'please', 'sorry', 'excuse me', 'it's delicious' – those kinds of things. And it's quite important in some places to say "I'm a journalist I'm not a spy". Just a few words can get you out of some sticky situations sometimes.

How has studying languages helped you in your career?

I think that Russian changed my life really because if I hadn't learned Russian I wouldn't have gone to Moscow." This was just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was working for the BBC when things were hotting up over there and I was appointed the first Moscow producer. That would have been a much more difficult thing to get if I hadn't spoken Russian. Being there during the collapse of the Soviet Union was a life changing experience because it just made me fascinated by Russia and the former Soviet Union and everything that was going on there.

Why do you think it's important to learn languages?

I think it is part of being a global citizen. I know that sounds like a poncy thing to say but I actually really do believe that we are all inter-connected and the idea that English is the most widely spoken language and that we don't need to bother – I think that just puts us on the back foot. I could speak another language I'd like to speak Arabic because I think that is pretty useful at the moment. The security services were scrambling for people who could speak Arabic in 2003 during the Iraq war, and they realised they just didn't have enough of them. They don't have enough people who can speak Arabic or who might be interested in a career in the military or in diplomacy or working for NGOs.

What advice would you give to aspiring language learners?

To try and immerse themselves as much as possible. To not to get too hung up on grammar. I sent my kids to the French school in London – to the Lycée – because I just thought it would be quite good if they learnt from the age of 4. They speak French without an accent because they learnt it from such a young age and all the language in the classroom was French, but in the playground it was all English. You have to be prepared to make a fool of yourself and just throw yourself in. Some kids won't open their mouth as they're so worried that people are going to laugh at them. I think you should be allowed to make mistakes.

I think when the military and GCHQ make a fuss about language learning being essential to our defence capacity then the government will probably listen a bit more.