

1 Why languages make business sense

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1. Crossing borders

I am a Spanish national who has worked as a teacher and lecturer in the UK throughout my career. Being able to communicate in English has always been a very important part of my life, and a defining characteristic of my professional career. I started learning English in primary school, and always enjoyed it as a subject, but I never thought that my job would ever involve using English on a daily basis, let alone moving to an English-speaking country. As I enjoyed learning more and more and I spent more time in the UK in summer schools, an equally interesting phenomenon started taking place: learning another language can make you more sensitive to your own culture and can improve your language skills in your own mother tongue. Whether that had something to do with my decision to become a Spanish teacher, it is difficult to say, but I firmly believe the more you study a foreign language, the more fascinated you become about how a language – any language, even your own – works.

In my case, that fascination led to the decision to continue improving my English alongside my university studies, and to spend a year abroad in the UK as part of the Erasmus scheme. I can honestly say that the experience in the UK changed my life completely, not just from a personal perspective, but also because it would determine my professional career. The ability to communicate in English opened many opportunities for me, and it undoubtedly was instrumental in securing my first teaching job at Exeter University.

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I have worked in the UK since 1997, and my working day will usually involve a combination of English and Spanish. My teaching of language and content modules at Aston University, in Birmingham, are delivered in Spanish, but English is an essential part of my work outside the classroom. My current role as Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching means using English in different contexts, from the chairing of committees to the development of university policies or learning and teaching strategies. I know that all that has been possible because at some point in my studies I decided to continue a learning journey that started many years ago.

Over the last 18 years in Higher Education (HE), I have seen many students graduating either with a degree in languages or with some language courses within their HE studies, and I know that the skills acquired during their university studies have opened many doors for them too, as different sectors acknowledge the significance of languages, and the benefits it can bring to a business.

2. Careers with languages

There seems to be a misconception that languages can only be useful if you want to work in specific fields, such as in education or the translation and interpreting sector, but the reality is that language graduates will work in all sorts of different areas, from the travel, media or communication industry to the financial and public sectors.

Learning a language not only develops the linguistic skills associated with the discipline, but a whole range of other abilities which employers rate very highly. At degree level, learning a language will involve a proportion of assignments delivered in teams alongside other students as well as more traditional work produced through independent research. That combination of working in a collegial environment with peers from different backgrounds, whilst showing initiative, is a significant asset in the current job market. In addition, language graduates often show excellent analytical skills honed through the discussion

of complex issues in the course of their studies; language degrees will involve the analysis of topics related to cultural awareness, business, politics, ethics and economics. Employers value having graduates who have the ability to present an articulate argument, to negotiate, and to adapt their register or rhetoric. The development of these transferable skills is an integral part of most language degrees these days. Language graduates leave university with a great grounding in written and oral presentation skills: they could end up writing a speech for a government minister or delivering a pitch to win new business for a tech startup.

As with most HE institutions that offer languages, Aston University places a great deal of importance on an overseas placement year. This is often a work placement in a foreign company. Combined with the analytical and linguistic skills outlined above, this vital work experience also provides an important third dimension to students' development: cultural awareness in the workplace. In the British Academy's Born Global report², this awareness is one of the unique selling points of language skills and cultural intelligence:

“[e]mployers believe that it is not the fact that a person may be fluent in three different languages that makes them employable. There is a more subtle value, and that is the ability to recognise, understand and interpret cultural difference” (pp. 20-21).

In a globalised business world, you might argue that English – the dominant language – will prevail, but whilst a new employee might be able to communicate with their overseas colleagues in English, they may struggle to build new partnerships with customers, clients or suppliers. Indeed, data from Aston suggests that students who have spent time on placement will achieve a better degree classification. With the year abroad being an integral part of the degree, it could be argued that a year abroad leads to a better student experience but also to more effective graduate employees, and better career prospects.

2. Born Global. (2014). Summary of Interim Findings. The British Academy.

3. What are the needs?

For businesses, as competition grows, so does the need to compete in international markets. French, German and Spanish remain the most sought after languages in the UK, as the EU continues to be an essential business partner. We know – via research such as the CBI/PEARSON Education and Skills Survey 2015 – that languages continue to be valued by UK employers, with 45% recognising foreign language skills among their employees as beneficial, particularly in helping build relations with clients, customers and suppliers (36%)³. Students I have taught personally have ended up in successful careers ranging from teaching overseas to business consulting in emerging economies.

Being able to communicate in a foreign language – alongside the critical transferable skills I mention above – can be instrumental in building a sustained successful career. Together they provide a constant in a world of change. In academic circles, we often speak about, and plan for, developing the workforce of the future – including producing graduates who will perform roles we have not yet heard of in companies that do not yet exist. Businesses and business domains change rapidly, but the need to communicate effectively across borders and cultural boundaries will remain.

To meet this need for competent, articulate and versatile graduates, we must promote these skills earlier in the education system, hence the importance of the Routes into Languages initiative⁴ for raising the profile of languages in secondary schools. Universities which are part of the West Midlands Routes into Languages Consortium have created activities which stress the relevance of studying a language and introduce school students to the employability skills inherent in language learning. Some of our events include the ‘Year 9 Apprentice Day’ at Warwick University, ‘A Taste of Working Abroad’ at Birmingham University, and the conference on ‘Careers in Translation and Interpreting’ at Aston University.

3. <http://news.cbi.org.uk/reports/education-and-skills-survey-2015/education-and-skills-survey-2015/>

4. Routes into Languages is a government-funded programme aiming to raise the profile of modern languages within the secondary school and higher education sectors www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk

Whilst we continue to promote language learning from an early age, and its continued development through higher education, it has become essential to build partnerships between businesses and universities. In order for universities to build cadres of employable graduates, employers must participate in Advisory Boards to set direction, in curriculum design to build competence in key areas, and in providing placement opportunities to grow experience.

It is only with rigorous language academic programmes and with the encouragement of initiatives such as *Languages for All*⁵ that we will develop graduates who can thrive in and adapt to an increasingly competitive international business environment.

5. Languages for All is a common banner under which higher education institutions offer tuition in foreign languages to students in an attempt to boost language learning and associated skills.



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Employability for languages: a handbook
Edited by Erika Corradini, Kate Borthwick, and Angela Gallagher-Brett

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