

1 ‘Linguist’ or ‘Global Graduate’? A matter of identity for the global graduate with language skills

Jocelyn Wyburd¹

Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the problematic issue of identifying as a ‘linguist’ for graduates who have studied languages, in an employability context. I challenge them to reframe their identity as ‘global graduates’, with reference to the competencies outlined in the *Global Graduates into Global Leaders* report (NCUB, 2011). In the process, I also demonstrate why a truly global graduate needs also to be a linguist, in spite of the hegemony of English as a global *lingua franca*, and in the context of Brexit. I provide a framework for use by students, with support from educators, to translate their skill sets and experiences into the language of employers. I hope that this will provide a clear guide to the importance not just of developing, but also articulating cogently a range of competencies which are transferable to the global economy and global society, and a convincing argument for the importance of language and intercultural skills within that portfolio.

Keywords: global graduate, global competencies, English lingua franca, Brexit.

A graduating linguist at a careers fair asks, “what jobs do you have for linguists?”; the answer is “none, we outsource our translation requirements”. Similarly, a student seeking graduate roles which explicitly ask for languages might be disappointed by the lack of choice and range available. These

1. University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom; jmw234@cam.ac.uk

How to cite: Wyburd, J. (2021). ‘Linguist’ or ‘Global Graduate’? A matter of identity for the global graduate with language skills. In A. Plutino & E. Polisca (Eds), *Languages at work, competent multilinguals and the pedagogical challenges of COVID-19* (pp. 11-21). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.49.1214>

scenarios can challenge university linguists – students of languages and those who have learnt languages alongside degrees in other subjects – to question their study choices when considering graduate employment. Such scenarios also pose a challenge for (particularly UK) university staff who promote language study in order to break the mould of Anglophone monolingualism, and for global citizenship and employability in a global economy. Studying languages is much more than the acquisition of an instrumental transactional skill, but do students and employers alike sufficiently recognise this? Do educators need to find a new ‘language’ to help students identify the wider employability attributes they have gained in the process? I will explore what that new ‘language’ needs to be comprised of, while not neglecting the intrinsic value of language skills themselves.

University students will often self-identify according to their (main) subject of study: *I’m an engineer, a physicist, a historian, a lawyer, a linguist, a medic*, etc. In some disciplines, this terminology transfers directly into a professional identity, usually refined by further training: e.g. as an engineer or lawyer. Similarly, professional linguists – language teachers and academics, translators, and interpreters – become so through specialist postgraduate training. The subject-oriented identity is left behind by most graduates when they progress from being a social scientist, zoologist, philosopher, or linguist to employment, which is then accompanied by a new professional title. Few history graduates who go into banking or the civil service will continue to identify primarily as historians – and this applies equally to linguists. As graduates cease to be students and become something else with a new identity, they undergo multiple transitions requiring a considerable amount of adaptation and the adoption of new terminology.

The British Academy’s (2016) *Born Global* research observed that languages graduates were, compared to their peers, “often less capable of articulating the knowledge, skills, and attributes that they have acquired through their degree courses, and how these may be relevant to future employers” (p. 13). It is therefore incumbent on university educators of linguists to facilitate their students’ learning of yet another ‘language’ to address this deficit.

In an age of globalisation, the concept of the ‘global graduate’ is particularly pertinent. Drawing on evidence from business and graduate recruiters, the *Global Graduates into Global Leaders* report includes a ranked list of 14 ‘global competencies’ (NCUB, 2011, p. 8). Multilingualism is at number 11, but this should not dishearten linguists, as, higher up, we find *an ability to embrace multiple perspectives and challenge thinking* and *an openness to and respect for a range of perspectives from around the world*. Several others incorporate cross-cultural and multi-cultural dimensions, as well as *multi-cultural learning agility*. These competencies are summarised in a framework (NCUB, 2011, p. 12) under three interrelated headings of *cultural agility*, *global mindset*, and *relationship management* underpinned by the core competencies of *learning agility* and *adaptability*. Each has more specific overarching competencies, such as *resilience*, *multilingualism*, *multi-cultural knowledge*, *social etiquette*, *negotiating*, *influencing and leading teams*, and *empathy*.

The NCUB’s (2011) framework corresponds felicitously to the *Born Global* assertion that

“the attributes of languages graduates go beyond technical linguistic skills, important though those undoubtedly are, and even beyond intercultural understanding, embracing analytical rigour, resilience, the ability to communicate sensitively and subtly and the maturity and independence which come from studying or working abroad” (The British Academy, 2016, p. 12).

I have therefore used the NCUB (2011) global graduate framework as the basis of a toolkit I propose to promote critical thinking and reflection on student development through language and related studies and experiences.

Any student can map their formal and informal learning and developmental experiences onto this framework and, thus, articulate their identity as a global graduate. In Table 1 below, I suggest how university linguists might do so. Students may need support from educators in the process of developing their new identity and in engaging with the critical reflection required to evidence it.

This also builds on my previous related work (Wyburd, 2017) looking at how the terminology of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject benchmark statement for languages, cultures, and societies (QAA, 2019²) can be used to articulate employability competencies.

Table 1. Mapping graduates in and with languages onto the Global Graduate (NCUB, 2011) skill set

Skill set	Sub-skill	Can be developed through...
Cultural Agility	Resilience	• Residence abroad
		• Coping with challenges (studies, personal life)
		• Working/studying/living with people of different cultures (at home/abroad)
		• Navigating different ways of thinking and living
	Multi-lingualism	• Language degrees
		• Language learning alongside other studies
		• Language acquisition while abroad
		• Active use of heritage language(s)/bilingual background
Global Mindset	Multi-cultural knowledge	• Studying literature/culture/history/philosophy/politics/society/religions/economics, etc. from wider perspectives (breaking away from Anglocentric ‘norms’)
		• Contrasting perspectives from different cultural traditions
		• (Multi-) cultural learning from residence abroad
	Social etiquette	• Sensitivity to contrastive norms of behaviour – willingness to adapt
		• Studying communication styles
		• Studying contrastive rhetorical traditions – discourse analysis in L1s and L2s
		• Critically observing behavioural norms when abroad/in multi-cultural contexts
		• Online etiquette in multi-cultural communications

2. The 2015 version was referenced in that chapter, but it has now been replaced by an updated version, which is materially still entirely relevant to the argument made.

Cultural Agility and Global Mindset	Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living/working/studying alongside others from diverse backgrounds: (1) building awareness of other perspectives/views and (2) building rapport and respect for diversity/otherness
Relationship Management	Negotiating and influencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication skills – from project work, language classes, other
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group projects – team-work at university/work experience
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student societies/sports
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-cultural multi-lingual teams/groups (at home/during residence abroad)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating online learning and social spaces
	Leading teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work experience • Student societies/sports • For further development in employment – aspirational for new graduates
Core skills underpinning all the above	Learner agility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning new skills, e.g. language learning alongside other subjects
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning in unfamiliar contexts – abroad, work experience
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning in multi-cultural groups/through L2 medium
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing new skills and behaviours in response to diverse contexts (including online/remote learning)
	Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residence abroad – adapting to new lifestyle, environment, culture
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working/studying with people from different backgrounds/cultures – abroad or at home
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to cultural and contextual challenges (including online/remote learning and cross-cultural social interaction)

The majority of the global graduate competencies are commonly described as ‘soft skills’ – personal attributes which enable human interaction. These can be seen (unhelpfully) as being of lower value than the ‘harder’ technical or scientific skills of relevance to specific industries, which are largely by-products of STEM subjects. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, [The British Academy \(2017\)](#) published *The right skills*, celebrating the skills developed by Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (AHSS) graduates and their contributions to the global economy in a wide range of sectors. They followed it in 2020 with *Qualified for*

the future (The British Academy, 2020) to provide quantitative evidence of the tangible benefits of those skills to the UK workforce, economy, and society, now and for the future.

In these publications, AHSS graduates are described as acquiring high-level skills, crucial in a data-and digital-driven environment and a global context, particularly noting increasing demand for *adaptability* and *flexibility* in a fast-changing world. They classify the core AHSS graduate skills under three broad headings: (1) *communication and collaboration*, (2) *research and analysis*, and (3) *attitudes and behaviours characterised by independence and adaptability*, while noting additional subject-specific skills, such as languages. It is important that student linguists recognise that they are likely to have broadly the same skill sets as other AHSS graduates, but with the crucial addition of languages and the by-products of residence abroad experiences enhanced by their language skills. Thus, the graduate linguist needs also to redefine their identity, not so much as a linguist but as an AHSS graduate with additional highly valuable benefits.

In 2020, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, the use of online video communications has forced everyone to refine their communication skills, with less reliance on body language and other non-verbal clues. When communicating in a second language and cross-culturally, the challenge presented is even greater. As a result, university linguists should be even better equipped for a future global work and trading model which may increasingly rely on remote communication.

Multilingualism itself could, from both the NCUB (2011) and The British Academy (2016, 2017, 2019, 2020) reports, be seen as a valuable addition, rather than crucial to the 21st century global graduate. It is therefore worth exploring two factors which may be erroneously contributing to the side-lining of language skills in this context. One of these is the prevalence of English as a global *lingua franca*. The other is Brexit. I consider each in turn below.

In Anglophone countries, campaigners for language learning have for decades attempted to counteract the perception that the rest of the world speaks English,

obviating the need for other languages. In 2002, the Barcelona European Council adopted an aspiration for EU citizens of proficiency in the mother tongue plus two languages, recommending the systematic teaching of two languages in statutory education. In 2016, an average of 94% of pupils (excluding UK students) in upper secondary education were studying English, while the next most studied language was Spanish (21.5%) and 59.4% were studying two or more languages (Eurostat, 2018). In the UK, however, since 2002, language learning has declined dramatically in secondary schools, and only 46% of 16 year olds in England took a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualification in any foreign language in 2018, as reported by the BBC (Jeffreys, 2019).

Does the hegemony of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) threaten the learning of languages other than English, whether in the UK or elsewhere? Smokotin, Alekseyenko, and Petrova (2014) observed that ELF “falls under the influence of the speaker’s native language and culture both at the phonetic and lexical-grammatical levels” and that “ELF speakers need not follow strictly linguistic and cultural norms of the English language native speakers since ELF communication frequently occurs without their participation” (p. 511). They point out that, where English was learnt traditionally as a foreign language, closely associated with the national cultures of major English-speaking nations, ELF is now a vehicle for communication between numerous different cultures, with English-speaking nations not necessarily represented. These observations represent a challenge to native English speakers who may pepper their language with culturally rich references and idioms, and/or fail to adapt phonetically or lexico-grammatically to the ELF environment they find themselves in.

The ELF medium itself is, thus, both culturally neutral and simultaneously a vehicle for highly diverse forms of cultural expression and identity which risk being mutually misunderstood. Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer (2008) observed that in an ELF context, “as far as intercultural competences and strategies are concerned, native speakers are frequently disadvantaged due to their lack of practice in these processes and over-reliance on English as their L1” (p. 27).

Jenkins (2018) similarly observes that

“[t]ranscultural communication skills are therefore paramount [and that] more successful ELF communicators will be able to adjust (or accommodate) their own use of English or other languages (so as to make it more appropriate for their interlocutors), and their own receptive expectation (so as to more easily understand what is being said to them)” (p. 26).

Crucially, the author asserts that

“the process of having learnt another language or languages is helpful in being understood by alerting speakers to what kinds of linguistic features non-native speakers may find difficult to understand in English [and that] many native English speakers lack both these skill sets” (p. 26).

In the same chapter, she cites an example from Van Parijs (2011) of EU meetings in which speakers of diverse nationalities speak in English, with few, if any, listening to interpreters. But, “when a British or Irish participant takes the floor, you can often notice that some participants suddenly grab their earphones and start fiddling with the channel selector” (Jenkins, 2018, p. 27).

The global graduate competencies considered above focused more on cross-cultural communication skills than on multilingualism per se. And yet, as seen here, multilingualism is actually crucial to cross-cultural ELF communication. Indeed, Jenkins (2018) reconceptualises ELF as being, by definition, a ‘multilingua franca’; she goes on to warn that “those who are monolingual will increasingly find themselves left behind in supposedly ‘English’ interactions in which their conversation partners translanguage in and out of other languages” (pp. 28-31). From ELF studies, one can therefore infer that a truly global graduate must be multi-lingual.

Each year since the UK voted to leave the EU in June 2016, annual surveys of UK schools have noted a resultant negative influence on attitudes to language

learning. *Language trends* 2019 reports that a significant minority of secondary schools cite Brexit as a “major challenge to the delivery of language teaching” (British Council, 2019, p. 15). Some respondents reported perceptions that leaving the EU actually *invalidates* the need for language learning, while others reported the opposite, noting stark differences in attitude depending on the socio-economic catchment area of specific schools and the multi-cultural make-up of the pupil cohort. The negative ‘Brexit effect’ on language learning may be short-lived once the reality of global trade and relationships, including with the remaining 27 EU members, drives ever greater need for languages.

Indeed, the *Languages after Brexit* collection of essays (Kelly, 2018) challenges the UK at all levels – individual, education, government – to take action on developing the language and intercultural skills the UK will need to thrive. In parallel, *Languages for the future* (British Council, 2017) explores the need for languages in the context of the UK’s future place in the world post Brexit and its likely trading partners. In ranking world languages by importance, the report partly considers whether future relationships will be limited by the extent to which other countries are willing and able to use English as a medium of communication.

The challenges thrown down by both these publications are taken up in the *Call for action* published, remarkably, by all four national UK academies – for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Science, Medicine, and Engineering (The British Academy, 2019) – which asserts that, if the UK became the ‘linguistic powerhouse’ it has the potential to be, it would be “more prosperous, productive, influential, innovative, knowledgeable, culturally richer, more socially cohesive, and, quite literally, healthier” (p. 2). It is very important that university students of all disciplines, including sciences, engineering, and medicine, recognise that, whatever the post-brexit trading model, languages will be fundamental to the global graduate skill set they will need to acquire. The importance of languages, and thus multi-lingual graduates to ‘Global Britain’ post Brexit, is further strengthened in the case studies from a range of economic and industrial

sectors included in the 2020 MEITS/AHRC³ policy briefing (Ayres-Bennett & Carruthers, 2020).

In conclusion, I have sought to demonstrate that the university linguist, whether a graduate of, or with, languages, needs to identify, in the context of employability, as a global graduate; and, furthermore, that a global graduate needs to be multi-lingual, in spite of the hegemony of ELF. I have sought to map the NCUB's (2011) global competencies, as 'high-level' skills, onto the opportunities that graduates of, and with, languages can develop through their university careers, including through residence abroad. Being a global graduate does not mean negating one's identity as a linguist, but is, instead, a translation of all that being a linguist comprises into a language which employers can relate to. Finally, I have sought to demonstrate that Brexit, far from invalidating the need for languages, will actually require greater multi-lingual capacity for the UK to thrive. University linguists are well placed to be truly global graduates because of their language skills and international experience. But, they will need to redefine themselves as such, rather than relying solely only on their identity as 'linguists'.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

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Languages at work, competent multilinguals and the pedagogical challenges of COVID-19
Edited by Alessia Plutino and Elena Polisca

Publication date: 2021/02/26

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2021 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-83-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-84-9 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-82-5 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: février 2021.
