



Languages
don't just open
doors, they
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and arms.

When we think about the benefits of learning languages, many of us immediately jump to the wide-ranging economic advantages that being multilingual affords us: higher salaries, ability to travel for work, better opportunities for progression and the fact that companies actively seek out those who can communicate in other languages in order to navigate this increasingly globalised world.

There is no denying that the more languages you speak and understand, the more employable and sought after you are in economic terms. This is true wherever you go and whatever industry you are in. However, maybe we are concentrating on the 'wrong' benefits?

In 1999, I decided to take four languages for my Irish Leaving Certificate (equivalent to the A-Levels in the UK). I too was mainly zoning in on the monetary gains from language learning... and perhaps also on some of the more tangential by-products like being able to chat to the French tourists who come to Westport every summer! But taking two foreign languages alongside Irish and English was unusual. Very few students in my year group, maybe 3 out of 100, took more than the one mandatory foreign language alongside Irish and English. We were given the same statistics that are rolled out today about how learning languages would make us more likely to get a job, how it would help us earn more money and how it would open up the world's business doors to us. Did it make a difference to our choice or to the numbers studying foreign languages? Not really. Those economic benefits that exist today, existed during the last 20 years too but paradoxically, they did not lead to more people taking languages. In fact, if we look at the statistics of those taking German and French at GCSE and A-level since I did my Leaving



Certificate back in 2002, they have been in constant decline rather than growing. So why is the message not getting through?

Maybe it is time to talk more about the societal benefits of language learning, rather than those focused on climbing the career ladder and the associated financial benefits? Maybe it's time we finally get the message across

that yes, languages open doors, but much more importantly, they open minds and they open arms. They expose us to others who may look different, sound different and are different. That is the key. Languages are a vehicle of inclusion. A vehicle of social justice. With hindsight (and some middle-aged clarity) I can now see that I chose to take 4 languages at age 15 not because of the monetary benefits, but because of all the subtle messages I was exposed to around the societal and communicative benefits of language learning: I grew up in a small BnB where my mother would always make the effort to greet people in their local language in the morning, even going to the lengths of learning how to say "*Haben Sie gut geschlafen*" or "Did you sleep well?" in an impressive amount of different languages. I had a sister who, at the time, had been in France as part of her Applied Languages degree and I found it so incredibly impressive that she could chat away to people in French when we went to visit her (after the longest car journey

from hell for a bored, pre-internet, 14-year-old!). That was the spark. That was the match lit under my linguistic curiosity.

From early on, I could see how being proficient in other languages allows you to chat, to understand and to laugh with people from another culture and background: it enables you to forge genuine and real bonds with other people, to communicate and connect with them in a way that you can only do while attempting to speak to them in their native language. This willingness to try (even though we know that we will make mistakes) acknowledges, upholds and respects their home language. It underlines that you are someone who sees other people's unique culture and background. In 2012, my friend Shane and I set off in my 1997 Mazda Bongo campervan to support Ireland at the Euros in Poland. But not until we had downloaded a few "learn basic Polish" podcasts for the 36-hour journey. I'll never forget pulling up to a set of traffic lights in rural Poland, with our Irish scarves draped around our necks and our green Paddy hats on our heads, with "Ja lubię czekoladę" (I like chocolate) blaring through the open windows. The local Poles were half in shock and half in awe that we were actually trying to learn some Polish for our trip. There were certainly no economic or monetary benefits to this, that is for sure. We wanted to learn a little Polish as that communicative fire had been lit underneath us. We wanted to meet, communicate and connect with others.

Research conducted by Pearson indicates that 73% of UK adults wish that they had studied a language in their lives and of those who had studied languages, more than 50% believe it has positively impacted their career, their friendships and their life experiences to date. There are also numerous bilingualism-based studies that highlight how knowing a second language enhances various facets of the brain's operating system. According to a study by The University of Penn State, the ability of multilinguals to switch between languages in their minds significantly improves mental flexibility and cognitive functions. Taking part in the language learning journey also enhances our self-esteem, embeds an even stronger sense of identity and significantly deepens our appreciation and understanding of true cultural diversity. Yes, of course, we should continue to highlight all of the wide-ranging and multiple benefits that language learning offers us. However, I would argue that we need to change our message slightly; or 'code switch' if you will. Let's get away from talking about what languages can do for you, your career and your pocket in the future and instead, let's focus on what they can do for you in the here and now; in your daily life, in your relationships and in your understanding of the world around you. Languages not only open doors, they open hearts, minds and arms. These long-term, overall, benefits to society dwarf the monetary and economic gains.

I leave you to reflect on these wise words from Dr Eowyn Crisfield's recent interview episode on The Motivated Classroom podcast: "*Languages are not about market value, languages are not about economics, opening the business doors to your child's future career. Language is about the here and now and communicating with people.*"



About the author

Dr. Liam Printer

Dr. Liam Printer hosts **[The Motivated Classroom podcast](#)**

and is the Leader of Pedagogical Innovation and Approaches to Learning at the International School of Lausanne in Switzerland where he also teaches Spanish in the middle and high school. His Doctorate in Education focused on motivation and teaching languages through storytelling and his research has been published in various peer reviewed journals. He has been invited as the Keynote speaker for five different international language teaching conferences in the past two years. Liam has also worked as an educational consultant with schools, districts and MFL teachers in the UK, Australia, Finland, China, Luxembourg, Belgium, Thailand, Denmark, Spain and Switzerland.

For a more detailed bio please visit:
www.liamprinter.com/about.html