

## Polyglots and Their Approaches: Points of Interest for Language Learners and Teachers

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# **Polyglots and Their Approaches: Points of Interest for Language Learners and Teachers**

Brendan Rodda

## **Abstract**

This paper is a preliminary step in studying the largely ignored topic of polyglots, people who have learnt many foreign languages to a high level of proficiency. The paper profiles seven polyglots to investigate approximately how many languages each one mastered and how they learnt their languages. Certain features that often appear in the language learning experiences of the polyglots are identified and discussed.

この論文は今までよく調べられていない数ヶ国語に通じるポリグロットという人達についての予備的研究である。七人のポリグロットのプロフィールを基にその習得した言語学の数と習得方法を調べる。この人たちの言語取得の経験の中でよく起こる事を見つけ論じる。

## **Introduction**

Despite their extraordinary success in language learning, polyglots have received very little attention from researchers in the field of language acquisition. This is in contrast to common practices in other fields of endeavour – science, art, business, sport and so on – where the most successful participants tend to be the object of close observation, analysis, discussion and imitation by others who wish to understand and reproduce their success. It seems reasonable to suspect that polyglots too, with their

mastery of 10, 20 or sometimes more languages, may provide insight into the language learning process, bringing benefit to many other learners, whether those learners wish to master one language or many.

Why polyglots have been largely ignored up until now is not very clear. It may be that researchers have doubted the truth of the polyglots' claims, dismissing the claims as the products of over-active imaginations, the language learning equivalents of Hercules myths or Bigfoot stories. Alternatively, researchers may have dismissed polyglots as genetic outliers, from birth possessed with such astounding aptitude for language learning that their experiences were not applicable to the typical language learner. These responses are understandable – after all, most of us have experienced difficulty making progress in one foreign language, so the notion of mastering a large number of them is almost inconceivable and we may instinctively consider polyglottery irrelevant or worse.

Nevertheless, it is somewhat odd that the topic has not been investigated in more depth. At least, research could confirm whether the above assumptions – that is, that the claims are false or that the polyglots have rare and innate aptitude – are supported by what we know of polyglots. If either assumption is indeed supported by the weight of evidence, then the topic can safely return to its place of obscurity in the field. On the other hand, it might emerge that there is truth to the claims and that the polyglots' success with languages stems from factors other than natural talent, in which case their experiences become highly relevant for the typical learner. It could be argued that research into polyglots has no more to offer than research into learners who have mastered just one foreign language and indeed there is a large body of such research – the so-called good language learner studies (e.g. Naiman et al, 1978;

Stevick, 1989). However, as well as offering a slightly different perspective from bilinguals, polyglots can be expected to have refined their learning approaches to a higher degree than bilinguals and therefore provide a more reliable perspective on successful language learning.

This paper provides an overview of the lives and achievements of several purported polyglots, based on a variety of non-academic sources. My aim is to determine whether their claims for language acquisition appear to be supported by evidence and, if so, whether the evidence suggests that the exceptional acquisition was the result of innate aptitude. I also attempt to identify the language learning approaches used by the polyglots. After the overview, I present several points of interest that emerge from it. Because of the non-academic nature of the source material, the conclusions reached here are preliminary.

## **Definition of terms**

Strictly speaking, a polyglot is a person who has proficiency in three or more languages; that is, a multilingual person. However, in general usage, the term refers to people who have mastered a substantially larger number of languages. This is the way it is used by Krashen and Kiss (1996), among others, and is the way it is used in this paper.

In relation to acquisition, I use the terms ‘mastery’ and ‘highly advanced level/proficiency’ interchangeably. They refer to a somewhat general concept that includes a high – but not necessarily native-speaker – level of precision, ease and fluency of communication using listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a wide variety of situations.

## **Polyglots and their achievements**

Because of the dearth of academic study on the topic of polyglottery, it is necessary to turn to other sources for information about the phenomenon. Fortunately, extensive records of the language achievements of several polyglots appear in biographies, memoirs, letters, language learning guides and, in the case of a living polyglot, a website. Based on such materials, the following are profiles of seven polyglots who lived in the period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Multiple sources in direct contact with the polyglot support the claims in each case and other circumstances – for example, the polyglot’s work or publications – tend to further the reliability of the claims in each case. During the period covered here, it is probable that there have been dozens of other polyglots but information about them is scant, inaccessible, unsupported or otherwise unreliable.

### **William Jones**

Jones was born in London in 1746. His mother began to educate him intensively from the age of three. Jones began attending Harrow school at six. He did not show any special interest or aptitude in foreign languages at first, but at the age of 10 his interest in Latin grew and within a few years he had reached a high level of proficiency. At 12, he entered secondary school at Harrow and began studying ancient Greek. He may have also begun studying French at this time as, by the age of 14, he was at least considering writing lengthy letters to his sister in French (Teignmouth, 1807, p.30). At the age of 18, in addition to his mastery of Latin, ancient Greek and French, he had enough understanding of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese to be able to “read the best authors” (ibid, p.42).

In his first year at Oxford University, he began studying Arabic, going so far as to hire full-time for several months a Syrian resident of London to assist him with listening and speaking skills. Soon afterwards, he began studying Persian. It seems that Jones mastered these languages within a few years and, at the age of 22, his fame had spread to the point that he was asked by the King of Denmark to translate a long Persian text into French. Around the same time, Jones published other literary studies in French. In his late 20s, while working as a tutor and writer, he began to study German and appears to have reached a fairly high level in that language too, as Teignmouth (*ibid*, p.465) claims that Jones “was thoroughly conversant in German”, among many other languages.

In his mid-30s, Jones was appointed as a judge to the high court of Calcutta, where he turned his interest to several Indian languages, mastering Sanskrit and reaching a fairly high level of proficiency in Hindi and Bengali. Incidentally, it was at this time that he made the observation for which he is most remembered – that the languages Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Persian and Celtic all derived from the same original language, now known as Proto-Indo-European.

Jones once wrote that he had mastered eight languages: English, Latin, ancient Greek, French, Italian, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit (*ibid*, p.465). However, he may have been unduly modest or harsh on himself for Teignmouth claims that he knew 11 languages thoroughly (*ibid*). Jones’s approach to language learning included the use of grammar textbooks, conversation with native speakers or highly advanced learners of the language and reading literature in the language. It is clear that he also did a great deal of writing in his foreign languages.

## **Giuseppe Mezzofanti**

Mezzofanti was born into a working-class family in Bologna, Italy in 1774. From the age of three, he attended a small, neighbourhood school, where the teacher noticed that he learnt quickly. He was soon promoted to another school, and then another. His strongest subjects were languages, at first Latin, then Greek and Spanish. Before he was 20, he had mastered them and was well on his way to mastering Arabic, Hebrew, Coptic, French and German.

Mezzofanti became a Catholic priest and was appointed professor of Arabic at the University of Bologna at the very young age of 23. His work in the church and at the university enabled him to meet people from all over the world and to converse with them in their native languages. In addition, he had the time, motivation and skills to study foreign languages by himself. Over the next decade or so, he added Russian, Hungarian, English, Persian, Swedish and Turkish, among others.

He became quite a celebrity and was often sought out by foreigners who wished to challenge him in the languages they knew. In 1817, when he was 43, he met Lord Byron and another English poet, William Stewart Rose. Both of them attested to his superb proficiency in English and other languages. Rose spoke with him at length on several occasions and found that he spoke English to a near-native degree, with great fluency and “extraordinary precision” (Russell, 1858, p.226). Byron was impressed by his thorough knowledge of English dialects, slang and swearing. His biographer, Russell, wrote that his own response to Mezzofanti’s English pronunciation was not that it was incorrect but that it “was almost too correct to be appear completely natural” (ibid, p.403). A German theologian, August Tholuck, visited him in 1829 and was more critical of his skills in various languages, though

still very impressed. In 15 minutes of conversation in German, Tholuck found four minor mistakes and noted that his accent, while good, was closer to Poles' pronunciation of German than native pronunciation. Tholuck tested him in several other languages that he knew – Arabic, Persian, Dutch, Danish and English – and found that Mezzofanti had problems only with Dutch, which he did not know, and Danish, which he could understand but could not speak.

In his biography, Russell presents strong evidence that Mezzofanti mastered more than 25 languages and had good knowledge and skills in 10 or more other languages. Mezzofanti does not seem to have had any secret method of learning. He told Tholuck that his “way of learning new languages was no other than that of our school-boys, by writing out paradigms and words, and committing them to memory” (ibid, p.278). He also read a great deal of literature in his foreign languages and took every opportunity to speak the languages. Although his success is often explained as the fruits of an innate gift, it is clear that he worked very hard almost daily for decades to acquire and maintain his languages.

## **Richard Burton**

Burton was born in Torquay, Britain in 1821. As a boy, he travelled widely with his family in Europe and lived for a few years in France. He showed early talent for learning the languages and dialects of France and Italy. In 1840, he entered Oxford University, where he studied Arabic until he was expelled the following year because he had attended a horse race.

After his dismissal from Oxford, Burton joined the British Army and was stationed in India for seven years. Unlike most of his military colleagues, he

immersed himself in Indian culture, including study of at least five of the languages. It is not clear what level he reached in these languages but it seems that in Hindi, at least, he had advanced proficiency. He was also said to be able to pass himself off as a local when he spoke Sindhi and dressed in disguise (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911). While he was acquiring these languages, he continued his study of Arabic and Persian. He used Arabic extensively in 1853, when, in disguise as a Muslim, he joined a pilgrimage to Mecca, a transgression that would have been punished by death had he been discovered. Although there is no doubt that his Arabic proficiency was very good, he might not have been at a highly advanced level at this time as he failed an army translator's Arabic test just after he returned from Mecca. In his 30s, he became an explorer in Africa, then a diplomat, based first in Africa, then Brazil, the Middle East and Austria. In each location, he continued to study local languages, although reports of his proficiency in these languages are sketchy. Later in life, Burton took to translating into English famous Indian and Arabic texts, such as *The Kama Sutra*, *The Arabian Nights* and *The Perfumed Garden*.

It is difficult to quantify the number of languages that Burton mastered. Some sources put the figure at more than 20, including dialects. That figure, however, is likely too high, probably including many languages that he was familiar with but had not mastered. A more conservative count of mastered languages would include: English, French, Italian, German, Latin, Greek, Hindi, Sindhi, Arabic, Persian and possibly Portuguese, with good proficiency in several other languages. Wright, although critical of Burton's work as a translator, acknowledges that he was an exceptional polyglot – “the greatest linguist and traveller that England ever produced” (Wright, 1906, p.xii).

Burton's approach to language learning began with memorisation of a list of sentence types, essentially a basic grammar. He would read through the list and a list of basic vocabulary several times a day, limiting each study session to 15 minutes because he felt that he lost concentration after that (Wright, 1906, p.65). He acquired these basics in a week or two and then began reading authentic literature, often a gospel, because he found these easy to understand. Using the text, he would greatly expand his lists of sentence types and vocabulary. He would repeat the process with more difficult books, always reading out loud so that "the ear might aid memory" (ibid). Burton also paid attention to speaking skills, repeating difficult sounds hundreds of times a day until he mastered them and sub-vocally repeating the sentences he heard in conversation with native speakers.

## **Harold Williams**

Williams was born in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1876. His father, a Methodist clergyman, tutored Williams from a young age. At first, he did not show much talent for learning but, according to Williams himself, he experienced a mysterious cognitive transformation at the age of seven and began making quick progress in his studies, especially Latin. While still a young boy, he coupled his two strong interests – Christianity and languages – by reading the Bible in Dobuan, a Melanesian language, and then constructing grammar and vocabulary lists from the text. In a biography of Williams, his wife claims that, at eleven, in addition to Dobuan, he knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, German, Italian and Maori (Tyrkova-Williams and Williams, 1935, p.3), although she gives no indication how well he knew them. By his late teens, the list had grown to include Dutch, Spanish, Fijian, Samoan and

Tongan (ibid, p.14). When he moved to Auckland at 17, he was able to practice speaking many of his languages with sailors at the port.

In his early 20s, Williams began studying Russian and Polish while working as a clergyman. After coming into conflict with church authorities, he left New Zealand for Germany, where he began studying at university. He eventually gained a doctorate in languages from Munich University. Next, he moved to Russia, where he worked as a correspondent for British newspapers. While there, he added several languages from the region, including Finnish, Latvian and Georgian. After World War One, he was unemployed for a time in Britain and took the opportunity to teach himself Hungarian, Basque, Chinese and Japanese. That he managed to teach himself to read Japanese newspapers is testament to his thoroughness. In 1921, he became the foreign editor for the *London Times* and so was given further opportunities to use his languages.

It is not clear how many languages Williams mastered in total. One estimate that is often given is over 50, but this is probably based on the languages listed by his wife in her biography of Williams, a list that might not be completely reliable and, in any case, does not take into account the question of whether Williams mastered the languages or simply had some proficiency in them. Nevertheless, given his extreme interest in and widely acknowledged talent for language learning, his doctorate in languages, his many years of living, studying and working in foreign countries while using the local languages and the accounts of many contemporaries, it is probable that he mastered 10 or more.

## **Kato Lomb**

Lomb was born in Hungary in 1909. She did not have any special interest or

proficiency in foreign languages until her 20s, although she had studied some French, German and Latin in her childhood. While studying for a doctorate in chemistry, she started taking French classes and had some success. After she obtained her doctorate, she began taking classes in English while at the same time doing a great deal of self-study in the language, such as using a textbook and reading English novels (Krashen and Kiss, 1996).

Lomb enjoyed the process of learning foreign languages so much that she moved on to other languages – German and Russian. At the end of World War Two, she used her Russian skills to interpret for Russian troops that had occupied Hungary. She next devoted herself to Romanian and Italian. At around 40, she began taking Chinese lessons at a university and became fascinated with the language and culture. A few years later, after reaching an advanced level in Chinese, she moved on to Japanese and eventually worked extensively as a translator and interpreter in both these languages. She continued learning new languages throughout her life, beginning her last one, Hebrew, in her 80s. She worked as a translator with a total of 16 languages but stated that she was not at an advanced level in all of them. In addition to her native Hungarian, she was at a near-native level in English, French, German and Russian and had a very high proficiency in five other languages: Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and Polish (Lomb, 2008).

Lomb wrote at length about her approach in *Polyglot: How I learn languages* (Lomb, 2008). Typically, she began her study of a language by perusing a dictionary with Hungarian translations. She did not necessarily learn words this way but gleaned basic knowledge of the writing system, phonology and morphology. This preliminary step was her way of sampling the language, “making friends with it” (ibid, p.148).

From there, she moved on to a grammar textbook. As well as completing exercises in the textbook, she would write similar sentences in a notebook. Because “all of this is a bit tedious” (ibid, p.149), she would at the same time read a novel in the language. At first reading, she simply tried to understand words from the context and write them down in their context in her notebook for review. Later, she would read the book a second or third time, each time trying to understand more of the story and hence the language. She would also listen to radio broadcasts in the language and record them for re-listening. Later in the learning process, she would study with a native speaker, focusing on listening and writing. She felt that writing was pedagogically superior to speaking because people are more likely to use more difficult language in writing and can thereby “expand the framework” of their understanding of the language. She would begin by writing her own compositions but, after she had progressed to a higher level, she would translate other texts into the language because this forced her to use language she otherwise would not have used. She valued speaking skills also – as would be expected of a simultaneous interpreter – but seems to have believed that other skills should be developed first.

In addition to the above activities, Lomb put a great deal of emphasis on attitude. For her, interest in the language was paramount, far more important than a gift for language learning, which was a concept that she believed to be largely an illusion. Nevertheless, she encouraged learners to use the concept to their own advantage, writing that they should convince themselves that they are linguistic geniuses because a positive attitude was important for success with languages (ibid, p.173).

## **Kenneth Hale**

Hale was born in 1934 in Illinois, USA and grew up in Arizona. From a young age, he showed an interest in other languages, learning the native American languages Navaho, Jemez, Hopi and Tohono O’odham from classmates in school and university, and learning French and Spanish in high school classes. His high school teacher recommended that he focus on one language at a time but Hale felt that he learned better when studying multiple languages simultaneously.

He obtained a doctorate in linguistics from Indiana University and did field work with ethnic groups whose languages had not previously been studied in depth by linguists, most notably several years of work with various Australian Aboriginal tribes. Later, he became a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he specialised in the languages of small minority groups. Hale himself was modest about his language abilities, which makes it hard to judge his actual accomplishments. He stated that he was fluent in only three languages: English, Spanish and Warlpiri, an Aboriginal language (Keyser, 2001). However, many of his fellow linguists attest to his advanced skills in many other languages, especially his native-like pronunciation and profound understanding of grammar. There are dozens of anecdotes relating how quickly and how well Hale acquired new languages (e.g., Yengoyan, 2003). Some of these – such as the story about him speaking fluent Japanese after watching a Japanese movie with sub-titles – are almost certainly exaggerated. Others are supported by multiple, reliable sources. As with other polyglots, the high figure that is touted in newspaper articles and websites – in Hale’s case it is 50 – is likely to be the number of languages in which he had intermediate proficiency or better. Nevertheless, the weight of evidence suggests the number he mastered was at least 10, many of

them languages spoken by small minority groups.

Hale said that he preferred to learn a language by talking with a native speaker. Then, using the knowledge he had acquired from conversation, he would write down his own sentences, the more complex the better. He was also said to use dictionaries, textbooks and novels if they were available in the language he was learning.

### **Alexander Arguelles**

Arguelles was born in the USA in 1964. According to his own account, he was not very successful at foreign language learning as a child and teenager. It was only when he entered Columbia University that he began to make significant progress. His language classes there met five days a week, had small numbers of students, were taught by enthusiastic teachers and took a traditional grammar-based approach. These conditions enabled Arguelles to progress to a good level in French and German by the time he graduated, though he does not make clear exactly how well he knew the languages at that time. During the same period, he also took classes in Latin, ancient Greek and Sanskrit, and studied Spanish by himself, using a grammar translation textbook, listening tapes and casual conversation with native speakers. His level in these languages was somewhat lower than his French and German at the time.

While studying for a doctorate in comparative history of religions, Arguelles continued his study of foreign languages, especially archaic languages such as Gothic, Old French, Old Norse, which were related to his thesis topic. He also used French, German and Latin for research and regularly spoke Spanish in social situations. After completing his doctorate, he received a grant to do research in Germany. In Germany, he made a point of avoiding English, going so far as to make German his “mental

operating system” (Arguelles, 2011a). He travelled throughout Europe at this time and found that, by virtue of his proficiency in several Romance and Germanic languages, he could very quickly reach an intermediate level in new languages, such as Italian, Dutch and Swedish.

After living in Germany for two years, Arguelles spent the next eight years, from the age of 32, working as a professor at a university in Korea. His position gave him considerable time to devote to language learning and he took full advantage of the opportunity. He claims to have often spent 16 hours a day studying, almost entirely by himself with textbooks, tapes and reading material, such as readers or novels (ibid). He focused at first on Korean and then explored a wide array of languages, some of which – Russian, Arabic, Persian and Greek – he learnt to a high-intermediate or low-advanced level. At the age of 40, he took up a position at a university in Lebanon and set about further developing his Arabic proficiency. Now at 47, he lives in Singapore and continues to work at strengthening his most advanced languages. Through his own and other websites, Arguelles has provided some information about his level in various languages. However, he tends to focus primarily on his level of reading comprehension in the languages and gives relatively little information about speaking and listening skills. Some assessment of his speaking skills in some of his languages can be made from internet videos in which he speaks the languages (e.g. Arguelles, 2008; Arguelles, 2011b). Furthermore, several people attest to his speaking skills in the various languages that they have heard him speak (e.g., McCormick, 2009). These remain somewhat unreliable measures of proficiency – as is the case with other polyglots – but they indicate that Arguelles has probably reached a highly advanced level in at least 12 languages: English, German, French,

Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Latin, Old Norse, Old French, Korean, Russian and Arabic, with Portuguese, Greek and perhaps Persian on the cusp of that level.

Like Lomb, Arguelles has written at length about his approach to language learning. In the early stages of learning, he prefers to work by himself with grammar-based textbooks, such as the old versions of Assimil, Linguaphone or Teach Yourself series. He listens a great deal to the recordings that accompany the textbooks and also reads readers or other easy reading material. He has long used two somewhat unusual techniques: shadowing and scriptorium. Shadowing involves listening to speech in the language and immediately repeating it out loud. This leads to more intense concentration on the listening task, helps to develop better pronunciation and speaking speed and may also promote noticing of grammatical structures. The scriptorium technique involves reading out loud and then copying down sentences from written texts. After copying down the sentence, the learner checks any unknown grammar or vocabulary in it. This technique ensures a more thorough consideration of the language of the text, while also providing further practice of speaking skills. When he has gained a solid foundation in the language, Arguelles often takes private lessons with native speakers to improve his speaking skills and reads authentic native-speaker texts, such as novels. He also tries to speak the language as often as possible, writing that, for the purpose of language learning, he became a more outgoing person “who sought out and created conversational opportunities” (Arguelles, 2011a). He tends to study more than one language at a time and usually spends only 15 minutes or so on each activity, so that a two-hour block of study, for example, often includes as many as eight different activities with two or three languages.

## **Discussion**

In the experiences of polyglots profiled in this article, certain features appear with such regularity that it is reasonable to suspect that they have widespread relevance in second language acquisition. Several of those features are outlined below. Of course, emerging as they do from brief and general profiles of only seven polyglots, these points do not represent firm conclusions but, rather, preliminary points of interest that would attain more significance in combination with similar findings in other studies of polyglots or other areas of second language acquisition.

### **Polyglottery is possible**

Even allowing for some imprecision or exaggeration in the source material, it is probable that each of the people profiled here reached a highly advanced level of proficiency in at least eight languages and that some of them mastered many more than that. The main finding, then, from this overview is that mastery of eight or more languages is possible. Some people would counter this assertion with the argument that these polyglots have a special and innate aptitude for language learning and therefore their experiences are not applicable to typical language learners. This argument leads us to the next point.

### **Innate aptitude is a poor explanation for at least some cases of polyglottery**

Despite studying languages from childhood, both Lomb and Arguelles failed to make progress in foreign languages until relatively late ages (Lomb in her 20s; Arguelles at around 18). This indicates that they did not possess a special innate aptitude for languages and that such aptitude is not a factor in the extraordinary

success that they achieved after that. In fact, Arguelles (2011b) has stated that he does not believe he has special talent for language learning.

Even in cases when polyglots acquired multiple languages as children, they did not always experience the quick and straightforward progress we would expect from naturally gifted learners. Jones and Williams began learning a foreign language at very young ages – probably before five in both cases – yet neither of them made much progress for the first few years. Until the age of 10, Jones’s results for Latin were worse than many of his classmates at Harrow. If Jones and Williams did have extraordinary natural talent, it is odd that it took years of language learning before it became apparent.

### **Intense study**

Lengthy and focused study explains the polyglots’ success far better than innate aptitude does. Arguelles spent years studying languages for many hours a day, often as many as 16 hours a day. In her book *Polyglot: How I learn languages* (Lomb, 2008), Lomb makes it clear that she too put a lot of study time into her languages. Teignmouth wrote of Jones that “he was no less indebted to his uncommon industry and method for his attainments, than to his superior capacity” (Teignmouth, 1807, p.43). Russell (1858, p.476) wrote similarly of Mezzofanti that “the eminence to which he attained is in great part to be attributed to his own almost unexampled energy, and to the perseverance with which he continued to cultivate (his) gifts to the very last day of his life.” What fueled this intense study? Each of the polyglots had different reasons for learning foreign languages – Hale wanted to preserve endangered languages; Jones and Arguelles wanted to understand great works of foreign literature

in the original languages; Lomb wanted to further her career – but in addition to those reasons they all seem to have shared an intrinsic interest in languages and taken some delight in learning languages simply for the sake of learning and figuring them out, as if they were a game.

### **Self-directed active learning**

All seven of the polyglots directed their own learning to a very large degree, usually deciding of their own accord which languages they would learn and how they would learn them. That is not to say that they did not receive help from teachers and others. Even in that respect, though, the polyglots had very clear ideas about how to benefit from others' help and seemed to be very adept at implementing those ideas. In all aspects of the language learning process, they tended to be in control of their own learning.

### **Grammar focus**

Since the 1970s, there has been an ongoing and often intense debate in the field of second language acquisition about whether learners should or should not focus on grammar in their study. Although most of the polyglots profiled here were dead by that time and perhaps never gave the issue much thought, the beliefs of all of them are clear from their approaches – a focus on grammar is important for language learning. All of the polyglots made a point of paying close attention to the grammar of each language they studied. They did not necessarily study grammatical formulas or attempt to gain meta-cognitive knowledge of grammar but they did at least focus on grammar in context, especially by writing out and studying sentences that exemplified

grammar points that they wished to acquire. Krashen and Kiss (1996) downplay the importance of grammar study in Lomb's approach. However, Lomb herself states clearly in her guide to language learning that she spent considerable time focusing on grammar by doing textbook exercises, writing sentences based on certain grammar points and having her grammar (and other) errors corrected by a native speaker (Lomb, 2008, p.148, p.155).

### **Communication focus**

On the other hand, the polyglots also made strong use of communicative methods in their study. In accounts of their lives, it is very common to read that they went out of their way to find native speakers or advanced learners with whom they could practice speaking. It is interesting to note, too, that all of them read a great deal of authentic native speaker texts – novels and so on – in the languages they studied, often from the first stage of learning a language. In most of these cases, they appear to have focused more on the message in the book than the language, which means their reading was a communicative language learning activity. Thus, we see in the polyglots, approaches that always include both a grammar focus and a communication focus.

### **Learning more than one language at a time may have a synergistic effect**

Hale was the only one to state that he believed that learning more than one language at a time made it easier to learn each of the languages but most, or possibly all, of the polyglots did at some stage study two or more languages together. This suggests that there is a possibility that it has a synergistic effect. Hale's recommendation alone makes it worthy of consideration.

### **Languages can be mastered relatively late in life**

One of the persistent myths of language learning is that adults – and especially middle-aged or older adults – cannot make much progress in learning a foreign language. The myth is countered by all of the polyglots. Lomb is a particularly good example of an adult going from no knowledge to mastery. In her 30s, she began learning Russian and eventually reached a very high level in the language. In her 40s, she did likewise with Chinese and Japanese, her first non-Indo-European languages.

### **It is not necessary to spend time in a country where the language is spoken**

This is an obvious point. However, spending time in a country where the language is spoken sometimes appears to take on exaggerated importance in the mind of learners and lack of it is sometimes used as an excuse for poor results actually caused by lack of study. The most striking rebuttal to the belief is that Mezzofanti mastered more than 25 languages without ever leaving Italy. Lomb wrote that going to a country where the language is spoken often provides no benefits that could not have been attained in the home country and that it has very little benefit for learners in the early stages (Lomb, 2008, p.158-9).

### **Study every day**

The two polyglots who have written about their learning in most detail, Lomb and Arguelles, both recommend frequent study periods until a reasonably high level of proficiency is reached. In fact, Lomb's first rule of language learning was: "Spend time tinkering with the language every day" (ibid, p.159). Arguelles (2011a) states that one reason why he began to improve in French after entering university was that

he took French classes every day at university, unlike high school. Although it is not clear, it may well be that other polyglots placed similar emphasis on the frequency of study.

### **Multiple short periods of study**

Burton (Wright, 1906, p. 65) stated that he did not like to spend more than 15 minutes studying a language at one time. He certainly spent more time than that studying each day but rather than studying in one long block of time he used multiple short sessions. Arguelles appears to do something similar. Although he continues studying for longer periods of time, he tends to change activities roughly every 15 minutes, often changing from one language to another. Lomb also appears to have changed learning activities several times during each day's study.

### **Conclusion**

It is likely that the polyglots' success owes more to their regular and persistent study than any innate aptitude. As such, their approaches to learning have relevance for anyone attempting to learn a foreign language. Of special interest are the features that appear frequently in different polyglots' approaches, several of which emerged in the overview here. On the whole, the topic of polyglottery seems rich enough to warrant considerably more attention than it has received up until now.

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Learning languages is a skill, so the first time you try to develop a skill it is challenging. But, just like playing music or skiing, each time you work on the skill, you will improve and it will become easier. The only difference between polyglots and failed language learners is that the polyglot kept pushing through and didn't stop learning. As a result, they picked up tools and methods necessary to help them learn languages. The good news is these tools and methods are available to anyone. Once you learn how to learn a language, then the act of doing it becomes easier and easier with each