



The Language Explorer: Uncovering New Worlds at CLT

Rather than reflecting on the benefits of learning a language and why you should, I would like to reverse the question. Why wouldn't you learn a language? As someone who studied five languages at CLT and is currently teaching English there, I am of course more than a little biased. Let me tell you why.

The first language I ever learned at CLT was Hungarian. Maybe not the most obvious choice, but my grandfather was Hungarian, and I had unsuccessfully tried to learn Hungarian while on Erasmus in Budapest, so to me, there could not be a more obvious choice. I was not the only one in class that lacked the Hungarian words they so desperately wanted to know. On the contrary, the class was full of husbands whose wives were Hungarian (pro tip, don't go to Hungarian class to find a boyfriend, they are already taken), people that wanted to know the language to get closer to their heritage (like me), and others that had a holiday house there. And then there was our teacher, who did not have a drop of Hungarian blood. Nor did she have a Hungarian husband or a holiday house. What she did have, was a perfect command of, and love for, the Hungarian language.

I started studying Swedish because I took a semester at uni and I liked it. I did not necessarily feel a connection to the language, other than I just liked hearing it, until my teacher asked the class who had been to Sweden before. It turned out everyone, but me, had been. I, not one to sit back, called a friend that same evening and booked a flight to Stockholm. Yes, I could have ordered my drink in Stockholm (at Chokladkoppen, självklart) in English and they would have understood me. Yeah, I could have asked for directions in English and they would surely have helped me (and it would probably have gone a bit faster too). But there's something about the feeling of accomplishment of doing all of that in Swedish after a mere two levels at CLT.

It was an eye-opening trip to Japan with my Japanese colleague that convinced me to give this difficult language a try (I clearly had not learned my lesson after Hungarian). I might not remember all the words I learned in Japanese class, but I cherish the hopeful look of recognition in a Japanese student's face as I mangle the expression よろしくおねがいします (do not let the alphabet spook you, this is a basic expression). With a few words I have made them understand that I, too, know what it means to be a beginning learner and will never judge them.

A few years later, a new language urged itself upon me: I became absolutely and utterly enamored with the Portuguese (and specifically Brazilian Portuguese) language. The way the language sounded, the music, the culture, the people. I could not get enough of it. My teacher understood this and invited some native speakers to class at the end of the year, ready to listen to our newly developed language skills. I asked a Portuguese lady she invited how it was to be Portuguese in a Flemish environment. Did she still speak Portuguese with her children? Claro que sim! Sharing her language was opening a window to her culture and her heritage. Did some Dutch slip in at times? The short and snappy expression "pas op" was the first thing that came to mind. Some years after, in Arabic class (yup, still did not learn my lesson), I learned the word for fiancée (مخطوبة) (and the word for wife (زوجة)). The word "girlfriend" was notably absent. A fact that I, then girlfriend and now-wife of an Arabic speaker, found most peculiar. I decided not to hold this potential hiatus in his native language against him and married him anyway. We do try and speak as much Dutch together as possible, but every so often, some Arabic slips in and if that is not a full circle, I do not know what is.

If, after reading all of this, you have come to the inevitable conclusion that you, too, must study a language, let me ask you this: why wouldn't you study it at CLT? I am hugely indebted to CLT for the many (language) learning opportunities, both as a student and as a teacher. When life gets tough and I feel like I cannot find the answers I need, I draw strength from the knowledge there are still about twenty more languages this incredible school offers that I have not yet tried.

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