
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

For the love of foreign languages



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Rob

And I'm Rob.

Neil

Bonjour, Rob! Kon'nichi'wa!

Rob

Excuse me?

Neil

¡Hola! ¿Cómo estás?

Rob

Oh, OK, I think Neil's saying 'hello' in different languages – French, was it? And then.. Japanese? And... Spanish? Is that right?

Neil

¡Si, muy bien!

Neil

The English are famously slow to learn other languages. But it seems that Rob and I - and of course you - our global audience here at 6 Minute English - are good examples of **polyglots** – people who speak more than one language, sometimes known as 'superlinguists'. People who speak multiple languages benefit from many advantages, as we'll be hearing in this programme.

Rob

That word **polyglot** sounds familiar, Neil. Doesn't the prefix – poly – mean, 'many'?

Neil

That's right, like polygon – a shape with many sides.

Rob

Or polymath – someone who knows many things.

Neil

And speaking of knowing things, it's time for my quiz question. The word polyglot comes from Greek and is made up of two parts: poly, which as Rob says, means 'many', and 'glot'. But what does 'glot' mean? What is the meaning of the word **polyglot**? Is it:

- a) many words?
- b) many sounds? or
- c) many tongues?

Rob

Well, there's three syllables in 'polyglot', Neil, so I reckon it's b), many sounds.

Neil

OK, Rob, we'll find out if that's right at the end of the programme. But leaving aside the origins of the word, what exactly does being a **polyglot** involve? British-born polyglot, Richard Simcot speaks eleven languages. Listen to his definition as he speaks to BBC World Service programme, The Documentary:

Richard Simcot

A **polyglot** for me can be anyone who **identifies with** that term – it's somebody who learns languages that they don't necessarily need for their lives, but just out of **sheer** enjoyment, pleasure or fascination with another language or culture.

Rob

For Richard, being a polyglot simply means **identifying with** the idea - feeling that you are similar or closely connected to it.

Neil

He says polyglots learn languages not because they have to, but for the **sheer** enjoyment, which means, 'nothing except' enjoyment. Richard uses the word **sheer** to emphasise how strong and pure this enjoyment is.

Rob

As well as the pleasure of speaking other languages, polyglots are also better at communicating with others. My favourite quote by South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela, is: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in *his* language, that goes to his heart."

Neil

How inspiring, Rob – I'm lost for words! Here's another: 'To have another language is to possess a second **soul**'.

Rob

So language learning is good for the head, heart and **soul** – a person's spirit or the part of them which is believed to continue existing after death.

Neil

Yes – and what's more, language learning is good for the *brain* too. That's according to Harvard neuroscientist, Eve Fedorenko. She's researched the effects of speaking multiple languages on the brains of growing children.

Rob

Eve predicted that multilingual children would have hyperactive language brains. But what she actually found surprised her, as she explains here to BBC World Service's The Documentary:

Eve Fedorenko

What we found – this is now people who already have **proficiency** in multiple languages - what we found is that their language regions appear to be smaller, and that was surprising... and as people get better and better, more automatic at performing the task, the activations shrink, so to speak, over time, it becomes so that you don't have to use as much brain tissue to do the task as well, so you become more **efficient**.

Neil

Eve was testing children who already have language **proficiency** – the skill and ability to do something, such as speak a language.

Rob

Her surprising discovery was that the language regions of these children's brains were shrinking – not because their speaking skills were getting worse, but the opposite; as they learned and repeated language patterns, their brain tissue became more **efficient** – worked quicker and more effectively.

Neil

It's suggested that this increased efficiency is a result of exposure to different languages.

Rob

So that proves it, Neil: speaking many languages *is* good for the head, heart, mind and soul!

Neil

You took the words right out of my mouth!

Rob

And speaking of words, what does the 'glot' in polyglot actually mean? Was my answer correct?

Neil

Ah, that's right. In my quiz question I asked you for the meaning of the word 'polyglot'.

Rob

I said, b) many sounds.

Neil

But in fact the correct answer was c) many tongues. You may be a polyglot, Rob, but you're not quite a polymath yet!

Rob

OK, well, let me get my brain tissues working by recapping the vocabulary, starting with **polyglot** – someone who speaks many languages.

Neil

The language centres in a polyglot's brain are **efficient** – they work quickly and effectively in an organised way.

Rob

Proficiency means the skill and ability to do something well. And if you **identify with** something, you feel you are similar or closely connected to it.

Neil

Polyglots learn languages for the **sheer** enjoyment of it – a word meaning 'nothing except' which is used to emphasise the strength of feeling.

Rob

So speaking many languages is good for mind and **soul** – a person's non-physical spirit which some believe to continue after death.

Neil

That's it for this programme, but to discover more about language learning, including some useful practical tips, check out The Superlinguists series from BBC World Service's The Documentary!

Rob

Bye for now!

Neil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

polyglot

someone who speaks many languages

identify with

feel that you are similar or closely connected to something

sheer

nothing except; used to emphasise how strong, pure or powerful a feeling is

soul

spirit or non-physical part of a person which is sometimes believed to continue to exist after death

proficiency

skill and ability to do something well

efficient

working quickly and effectively in an organised way