

KAREN: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. This session is called Words Make World: the Power of Language Learning. And aside from the rugby, we've been having a great chat about learning languages and visiting different countries. And I'm joined by Mara, who is the head of Spanish at the Open University.

She's taught all of the Spanish modules at the OU and is currently in charge of producing a level three Spanish module. And her research area of expertise is in Spanish language teaching. So we have some fun widgets here that Mara has prepared for you. So could you fill those in?

These are multi-choice questions. So do you think the world would be better if everyone spoke the same language? What languages do you speak? Remember, we've got to put three things in or the results won't send. But if you can't think of three, if you don't speak three, just put a full stop in.

And also, what do you think the most difficult bits of learning a language are? So, Mara, that's a great question, huh? Wouldn't it be easier if everyone spoke the same language? And what is the benefit of speaking more than one language? What are your thoughts on this?

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ (Head of Spanish (The Open University)): OK, so I'm going to replay back with another question. Do you think it's actually possible to have a world with just one language? So is it really possible for everyone in the world to speak the same common language? And the answer is no because--

KAREN: No, I don't think so.

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: Yeah, exactly, because if you think about it, across history, all the moments where there has been a situation when it was possible for people to speak the same language, what has happened is that that language has fragmented into different dialects that have eventually become new languages themselves. So for example, it happened with Latin.

And then Spanish arose, French arose, Italian arose. And it would potentially happen to English as well if English became an international language. If you think about it, there are many different varieties of English that's spoken across the world. And if everybody started speaking in English, which seems the best candidate at the moment to become the world language, little by little, those local differences would become bigger and bigger and eventually wouldn't be understandable among themselves and would become a different languages themselves.

And also on top of being impossible, wouldn't it be boring? What do you think? I mean, cultures would be lost. And we wouldn't get a lot of benefits that we actually get when we do speak different languages and we get in touch with the cultures that are attached to those languages. So I don't think so.

KAREN: No--

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: [INAUDIBLE].

KAREN: Well, we can't even agree in the UK on one single name for a bread roll. So I think that the chances of one language, as you say, interspersing and having those sorts of natural dialects, it just seems to be something that's very innate. What are the benefits, then, of speaking more than one language? I mean, what do you think multiculturalism, this idea of having more than one language, but not only language, but an understanding of culture and it can do for the people and their communities and society more generally?

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: Yeah, so first of all, I mean, there are many benefits of speaking additional languages on top of your native language or languages. So first of all, there are known cognitive benefits to your self. So it helps with mental health. It helps with working memory development, for example.

And also there are social benefits such as say, for example, getting a better salary, better employment, understanding your culture as well because when you compare two cultures and two languages, you go deeper into your own culture and your language as well. So there are all sorts of benefits to attach to speaking additional languages. On top of that, you have to think, Karen, that the world is actually multilingual.

So multilingualism is actually the norm in the world. And more than half of the population speak a different language. And in fact, it's interesting to think why would you learn another language?

What would be your ulterior motives to start learning a language? And there are tonnes of reasons why you would do that. And in my experience as a lecturer at the Open University, students that start learning languages for a variety of reasons, all of them as valid.

So for example, some students decide they want a change in their career. And they would love to somehow do something different. They would like to travel the world, work in a different country, for example, or some others just find the love of their lives. And for personal reasons, they just start learning the different languages.

But if you think about it, all of them are very positive motives to learn languages. And all of them provide you with plenty of benefits and plenty of reasons to do it over and over again. So if you think about it, all of us are sort of multilingual in the making because at the moment, it's very difficult to find someone who only interacts in one particular language. So as I say, there are plenty of benefits and plenty of reasons why learning a language is beneficial for you and for your community and for the world in general.

KAREN: Mara, we started this session by asking people the same question we asked you about would the world be a better place if everybody spoke the same language. And we can see here that our audience at home said no, it would not be a better place. But we also ask them what sorts of languages they speak.

And I think you'll be quite surprised here to see the range of things that people are speaking at home. So let's take a look to see what's come here. So interesting things here.

English being the main one. French being the second one. Australian, Pigeon German, minimal French, Russian, Gujarati, German badly, toddler speak, a very interesting language and very, very important, Polish, double Dutch, Norwegian slightly, no, small amount of

French, Gaelic, and Brazilian Portuguese, and bits of Spanish. So there's lots and lots of different things going on here in terms of what things people are talking about.

I wonder if we can end by thinking about the difficult bits of learning a language. And I guess this ready leads me to question how they might be doing this at the Open University also. So what are the most challenging parts of learning a new language?

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: OK, so we have a widget coming about this question. But I'm going to act like a little bit like a widget here. And I'm going to predict what is going to come up.

And perhaps, [INAUDIBLE] grammar.

KAREN: [INAUDIBLE] you'd like to know.

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: Because yeah--

KAREN: I can show you.

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: --I'm curious.

KAREN: Go on, then. Let's see.

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: If I make a guess, maybe pronunciation, grammar.

KAREN: OK--

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: There we go.

KAREN: Let's see people at home and say. So this is what we asked [INAUDIBLE]--

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: Grammar.

KAREN: --about how you responded. So grammar, pronunciation, culture, understanding, pronunciation coming through quite a lot here, but also things like finding the time and the accent, the slang words as well, the different dialect, male and female words, remembering the phrases, listening to the natives. So lots of different issues here I think. How can you respond to this, Mara?

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: So it's interesting that everything that has come up is linked to language as an instrument of communication if you like, which is a very important function of language if you like. But on top of that, is it that important if we make a mistake related to a tense? My pronunciation hasn't been perfect during this chat. But did you manage to understand me?

So the point that I want to make here is that we need to demystify these topics as the most difficult bits to learn about a language. And we need to focus on the power that languages have to shape the world and to make words because if you think about the languages are more than grammar, languages are more than vocabulary, more than pronunciation, they are actually like a material and a historical force to understand the world we live in.

And that is a way we like to teach languages at the Open University as a tool to shape our personal and social identities if you like. And that really empowers us to be culturally aware of the differences and the richness of the cultures own languages of the world. So on top of discussing grammar point, supporting on learning vocabulary and perfecting your pronunciation, we'd be saying your language is as a cultural product, if you like, from the societies that speak that particular language.

And that this our idea, too. Because learning a language means more than mastering grammar, mastering vocabulary, mastering pronunciation. But it's the historicity and the importance of the concepts and of the conception of the world what matter to us as well and what makes us, as I say, culturally aware of what we are and how the world is made--

KAREN: That's wonderful.

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: --basically.

KAREN: Thank you so much, Mara. And everyone in the chat thinks you have a wonderful accent. I could listen to it all day. But we unfortunately we can't.

MARA FUERTES-GUTIERREZ: Oh, thank you.

KAREN: We don't have time for anymore as often the case here at the Student Hub Live. So we're going to have another campus tour. I know many of you have said when this virus and restrictions are over, you'd love to visit the campus. We'd so love to have you there.

We'd love to be back there also. But isn't it wonderful that we can connect online? And so many people will never go to campus. But that's not really where the heart of the Open University is.

And it's so nice to be able to share experiences online and have a virtual cup of coffee with you all here today. So let's do another campus tour. And then we're going to talk about changing lives around the world in our next session. So don't go away. See you in a minute.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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