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Research article

Eliciting Multilinguals' Strategies in Studying Ancient Languages

Dina Nikulicheva

Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences
1 bld. 1, Bolshoy Kislovsky per., Moscow, 125009, Russia
Moscow State Linguistic University
38 bld. 1, ul. Ostozhenka, Moscow, 119034, Russia

Abstract. This paper discusses the ways polyglots study ancient languages. Understanding their methods helps to expand the inventory of effective linguo-didactic strategies. The relevance of this study is corroborated by the growing number of recent foreign publications devoted to the study of ancient languages by multilinguals. The introductory part of the article focuses on terminological differences between the concepts “polyglot” and “multilingual”. This issue is essential for selecting respondents participating in the study. Definitions of basic concepts are compared based on quantitative, value, ontological, teleological and behavioral criteria. The paper starts with the analysis of the interview with Maria Flaxman, a researcher of ancient Germanic languages. The discussion centers on how her experience of self-studying modern languages shaped her strategy for learning ancient languages. In the second part of the article the identified strategies are compared with the strategies of three other polyglots learning ancient languages. Altogether four polyglots (three men and one woman), who speak, in addition to many modern languages, several ancient languages (two to four languages), took part in the study. A comparison of their responses to a questionnaire, which included 21 points on quantitative and qualitative (age, period, value, behavioral and other) aspects, helped to reveal a number of general patterns, such as: ■ strong internal motivation; ■ the indispensable learning of Latin, regardless of the varying set of other ancient languages; ■ effectiveness of parallel study of modern and ancient languages; ■ the favorite ancient language for all respondents was the one in which they applied their individual strategies; ■ all respondents noted a reduction in the time it took to study their last ancient language compared to the first, as well as ■ the regularity of practicing these languages in the reading mode. The study, thus, makes a contribution to methods of acquiring ancient languages both within the framework of a university curriculum and in the process of self-study.

Keywords: ancient languages, polyglot strategies, motivation, parallel learning, auditory component, frequency of repetition

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Выявление стратегий мультилингвов в изучении древних языков

Д. Б. Никуличева

Институт языкознания РАН
125009, Москва, Большой Кисловский пер. 1, стр. 1
Московский государственный лингвистический университет
119034, г. Москва, Остоженка 38

Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению древних языков полиглотами и направлена на расширение инвентаря эффективных лингводидактических стратегий. Актуальность исследовательской задачи подтверждается ростом числа новых зарубежных публикаций, посвящённых изучению древних языков мультилингвами. В вводной части статьи обсуждаются некоторые терминологические вопросы, связанные с определением понятий «полиглот» и «мультилингв». Данный вопрос имеет существенное значение, поскольку связан с принципом отбора респондентов, участвующих в исследовании. Сопоставляются определения полиглотов исходя из количественных, ценностных, онтологических, телеологических и поведенческих критериев. В первой исследовательской части статьи анализируется материал интервью с исследовательницей древних германских языков М. А. Флакман. Обсуждается то, как её история самостоятельного изучения современных языков повлияла на формирование её стратегии изучения древних языков. Во второй части исследования выявленные стратегии сопоставляются со стратегиями изучения древних языков тремя другими мультиязычными респондентами. Всего в анкетировании приняли участие четыре человека (трое мужчин и одна женщина), владеющих, помимо множества современных, несколькими древними языками (от двух до четырёх языков). Сопоставление их ответов на анкету, включающую 21 пункт и отражающую количественные и качественные (возрастные, временные, ценностные, поведенческие и другие) аспекты, позволило выявить ряд таких общих закономерностей, как: ■ сильная внутренняя мотивация; ■ обязательное присутствие латыни, независимо от варьирующегося набора прочих древних языков; ■ эффективность параллельного изучения современных и древних языков; ■ любимым древним языком для всех респондентов оказался тот, на котором они применили свои индивидуальные стратегии; ■ всеми респондентами отмечалось сокращение сроков изучения ими последнего древнего языка по сравнению с первым, а также ■ регулярность возвращения к этим языкам в режиме чтения. Таким образом, исследование позволяет внести вклад в методики усвоения древних языков как в рамках университетской программы, так и в процессе их самостоятельного изучения.

Ключевые слова: древние языки, стратегии полиглотов, мотивация, параллельное изучение, аудиальная составляющая, периодичность повторения

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Introduction

The topic of studying ancient languages for the purpose of activating students' linguistic abilities (metalinguistic awareness) is attracting more and more attention. A number of articles published abroad in recent years have been devoted to a multilingual approach to language learning using ancient languages. Primarily, it focused on Latin [4], [5], [14]. In fairness, it should be noted that the importance of studying Latin in connection with the topic of polyglottery was raised in Russian linguistics back in the 1990s and was one of the key topics in the book by Anatoly Yudakin, *Is It Possible to Learn 50 Languages?* [21].

In recent years, research has shifted to the experimental approach. Take for example the joint study by Ulrika Jessner, Valentina Török and Claudia Pellegrini [5] carried out as part of the LAILA project (Linguistic Awareness in Language Attrition) at the University of Innsbruck. The article deals with the experimentally revealed cognitive advantages of multilingual students who speak Latin compared to multilingual students who speak only one of the modern Romance languages for understanding text in an unfamiliar Romance language (Romanian).

Fifty native German students were studied. They were offered a short text: an authentic hotel description in Romanian as a language unknown to the students, but belonging to the Romance language family. Thirty participants formed the English/Italian group (Group A) and twenty the English/Italian/Latin group (Group B). Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of their think-aloud protocols demonstrated *"a set of skills or abilities that the multilingual user develops owing to her/his prior linguistic and metacognitive knowledge"* [ibid., p. 86].

In fact, such articles justify the revival of teaching and learning ancient languages for the purpose of increasing the cognitive potential of students in general and their language abilities and competencies in particular.

In my opinion, the most interesting observation was that group A (German, English, and Italian) in understanding the Romanian text relied on one of the closest languages, Italian, while group B (German, English, Italian, and Latin) showed higher comprehension results, relying on the entire repertoire of their background languages: *"While members of group A mentioned mainly Italian as their supporter language (88.7%), test takers of group B deployed their entire language repertoire more extensively. They repeatedly mentioned Latin and English as possible sources for cognates and even thought about the potential of languages they do not speak (French and Spanish)"* [ibid., p. 96].

Studying Latin leads to what the authors of the article call *"qualitative change (catalytic effect) in experienced language learners"* or *"emergent property of a multilingual's cognitive system"* [ibid., p. 99]. As for the emergent properties in nature, see [1].

Discussion: Definitions of concepts "polyglot" and "multilingual"

At the recent round table discussion "Polyglottery" at the International Conference "Language, Consciousness and Communication: Methodology and Humanities Practices (Modern Challenges)" [17] Claudia Pellegrini delivered her paper "Language maintenance in multilinguals from a Dynamic Model of Multilingualism perspective: Research results" where she raised the question of the relationship between polyglottery and multilingualism and noted different approaches to their differentiation. As a complete failure to distinguish between the two concepts, she cited a statement from an article by Elka Todeva and Jasone Cenoz that "polyglot is typically defined as a generic term for a multilingual person, not infrequently in reference to people with an impressive number of mastery of languages" [20, p. 18], cf. [9, p. 15]. Unlike the speaker, I believe that this definition still implicitly contains a quantitative criterion ("impressive number of languages"). This number, which distinguishes a multilingual from a polyglot, was first explicated in the book by Dmitry Spivak [19]. Based on a survey of numerous polyglots, he proposed the so-called "rule of seven", which states that on average a person can know fluently no more than seven languages.

Commenting on the “rule of seven languages”, Michael Erard writes that although this rule is considered controversial, no one has yet proposed reasonable counterarguments. Erard himself indirectly confirms the “rule of seven” with statistical surveys, the results of which he summarizes in a special graph (Fig. 1):

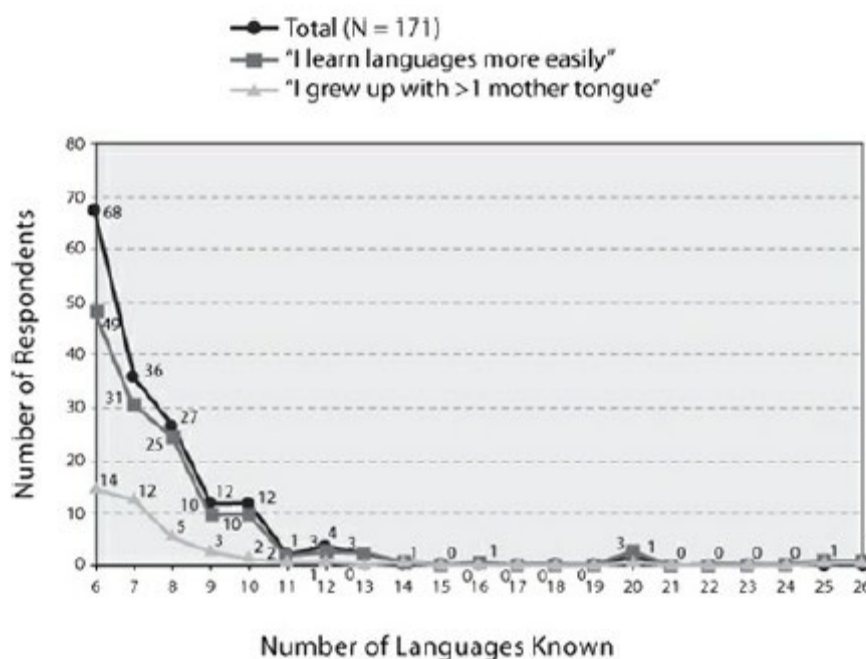


Figure 1. Polyglot language repertoires [2, p. 225].

Thus, among 171 respondents who stated that ■ they learn languages more easily or that ■ they grew up with more than one mother tongue, 117 people (68 and 49, respectively) reported that they knew six languages, while the number of those who knew seven languages reduced by almost half and amounted to only 67 people (36 and 31, respectively).

In addition to the quantitative criterion, some researchers put forward another one that can be called *teleological*: “Perhaps the only difference between multilinguals and polyglots is that the latter *spend their time studying languages they do not need for everyday practical purposes*” [13].

Some researchers base their definition on the *value* criterion: “A polyglot is an experienced, autonomous learner of many languages who is characterized by a *life-long passion for language learning*” and “a high motivation, an *open-minded attitude* towards other languages and cultures, *perseverance* and *self-discipline* are characteristic features of a polyglot” [15, p. 301], [16, p. 47].

For the Russian school of polyglot research, the *ontological* criterion is important: “differentiating polyglots as individuals who know *multiple languages* as a result of *consciously learning them*, from multilinguals, those who can speak several languages thanks to having assimilated them unconsciously in a multilingual environment” [7, p. 135], see also [8].

I support a *behavioral* criterion for identifying polyglots: the development of personal effective strategies corresponding to their own personality: “polyglots are people who, as adults, achieve impressive results in learning *multiple* new languages precisely due to the fact that, based on intuitively developed strategies, they were able to *use the full potential of their personality to optimize the process of language learning*” [12, p. 91], see also [10], [11].

For the purposes of my polyglottery research, which aims to apply polyglot strategies to ordinary language learners, the behavioral aspect in defining a polyglot is more important than the purely quantitative one. That is why my study included people who know five or more languages and have experience in independently learning languages, including several ancient ones, and using their own effective strategies.

Later, I would like to compare the results obtained with the experience of how ancient languages are learnt by hyperpolyglots, for example, Alexander Argüelles, who knows more than 50 languages, including 10 ancient ones: Old Norse, Old High German, Middle High German, Old French, Old English, Middle English, Middle Dutch, Old Occitan, Old Swedish and Gothic) [15].

Material & methodology: Interview with Maria Flaksman

My interest and further research were triggered by the presentation of one of the participants in the conference “Lingua Gotica: New Research” held at the Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences, on April 5, 2022 [18]. A 33-year-old researcher from Saint Petersburg, Maria Flaksman, who is currently working at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (Munich), gave a talk entitled “Sound imitation in Gothic” (an unusual topic for an ancient language!). Gothic texts of a forth-century Bible translation are a very unlikely place to look for onomatopoeias. However, in the paper in question, the author studied sound imitations. She set out to figure out how such words as ‘to shout’ (*hropjan*), ‘to cry out, weep’ (*wopjan*), ‘to boast’ (*hwopan*), ‘to crow’ (*hrukjan*) etc. sounded in the Gothic language [3].

At that point, I thought that this researcher, obviously, places high value on the acoustic component, which, in general, is very unusual for researchers of “dead” languages. My hunch was also strengthened by how authentic Maria Flaksman sounded speaking modern languages, fluently switching from English to German during the discussion. My assumption was confirmed when, later, at a round table devoted to the problems of teaching the Gothic language, she casually noticed that she was learning Gothic while listening to an audio recording (!). This prompted me to write to her after the conference and ask for an interview. Part of this paper is based on the transcript of this interview.

From the very beginning of our conversation, Maria stated that she is not a polyglot, since she speaks only five modern and three ancient languages: *“I am a native Russian speaker, not bilingual. I speak English – professionally, German – fluently, I also speak, read, watch films in Spanish. And in Icelandic I speak on basic topics. Regarding my three ancient languages, I read literature in Old English (I teach it), in Gothic (I read all existing texts) and in Old Norse (I read quite a lot)”*.

In spite of her protestations, Maria obviously exhibits polyglot strategies, which is not surprising considering her life story. *“Almost all the languages that I learned, I learned by myself, just using various resources”*, she says. Like most polyglots, she developed her strategies as a teen-ager: when she was 13–14. *“My school was an ordinary one, not a specialized school. English was taught very poorly. At school, English was not perceived as a language, it was perceived as a kind of algebra. During math we solved equations, during English classes we substituted endings. It was a kind of analytical activity that had nothing to do with communication. I did not feel love for the English language, or the desire to do anything. But at the age of 13 or 14 I felt like reading a book in English. My favorite author is Isaac Asimov. My parents had a series of his five books. The first four were in Russian, and the fifth, the last one in the series, was only in English. It was in summer. I was in the country, I didn’t have a dictionary, and at that moment, of course, I didn’t have the Internet. My level then was A2, maybe a little higher. But I had this desire to read the book to the end. To understand it. In principle, I understood the plot. Later I found out that I understood everything correctly”*, Maria sums up.

So far, we have a typical **“reader strategy”**, described in my book about polyglot strategies *Speaking, Reading, Writing* as a strategy of Irina Shubina [11, p. 136–155]. Like Irina, Maria has strong logical thinking. She relied on visual contextual comparisons and learned to grasp the meaning of the whole: *“Learning a language is a joy for me. It’s something you experience when the unknowns come together”*.

However, unlike the typical “reading polyglot”, Maria needed an auditory component too. So when the 14-year-old Maria turned to *Harry Potter* after Asimov, she was eager to listen to the spoken text. She says: *“Then I bought the Harry Potter book. Downloaded the audio. I really liked the book. Then there were only four of them. I constantly read and listened at the same time. And sometimes I listened to passages that I had not read yet. I would listen more than once: not just two or five times, but maybe 100. The more I listened, the better I understood the text”*.

This is how “basic knowledge is gained: about pronouns, how the endings of verbs look like, how to distinguish between an adjective, a noun and a verb. And gradually you compile the most basic vocabulary, which you can use in further studies”. “Now I could see the logic of the text. It goes beyond your conscious effort of translation. I repeated words and phrases and linked them with the context. I understood how the words combine and what they mean”.

That is, reading and listening simultaneously became a necessary component of the learning strategy, which involved returning to the misunderstood text elements and writing out unfamiliar words, as well as multiple repetition and “absorption” of the familiar text by ear.

“I have never read Harry Potter books in Russian”, she continues. “And when I opened the translations, they seemed very strange to me, because I have never seen in dictionaries a lot of words that I learned by listening the book. I just knew what the word meant”.

“Later, when studying at the university, during translation classes, it was sometimes difficult for me to come up with Russian equivalents. I never learned words in a “dictionary” style: as two columns – a word and its translation. I understood the system of the English language as a whole, and of the Russian language – as a whole. But both systems were separate from each other. It was always difficult for me to translate, because English and Russian texts seemed like separate files lying on different shelves, and there was little interconnection”. When doing grammar exercises during English classes, I instinctively knew what was correct. That is, I proceeded from the text, from the big context to understanding the entire structure of the language”.

Later, Maria applied this same strategy to study German and Spanish. She continues: “This is how I learned living languages. And I decided that dead languages can be **revived**, because they also have some kind of communicative foundation”.

“Dead” language revival strategy

Maria first began to study the Gothic language while preparing for her PhD exams. At first it was a standard process of reading parallel texts, identifying grammatical forms, writing out the meaning of unfamiliar words using Wilhelm Streitberg’s Gothic dictionary. This is where all graduate students of Germanic languages usually stop. But for Maria this was just the beginning. Here is what she says:

“After that, I took my texts, where the meanings of words were written out in Russian, the Russian translation of the Gospel and a microphone. And I read these texts as an audio book to myself – as an actor, with passion, with feeling. After that, I started listening to this amateur recording of mine – as I would listen to any audio book. I went around with this audio book for at least six months. I knew what the verb looks like in this text, what forms the noun has, I could roughly understand the structure, where the subject and the predicate were, and I already knew some words, like “he said”, “he repeated”, “exclaimed” and those verbs that occurred most often. What seems to me very important in this case is that I knew the subject matter well. I had a certain general context and a general narrative in my head. And I began to recognize passages by a few phrases: Hey, this is the beginning of a parable... Now the story will change direction... And listening to the text every time in a circle [she rotates the palm at ear level – D.N.] (and it’s not very pleasant to listen to your own voice), each time I began to understand more and more of this story. And then I just didn’t pay attention, I just listened to it like a text, it became clearer and clearer and clearer. And then I realized that I could just open the text [she opens her palms in front of her like an open book – D.N.] and translate from any line. I could forget some words or phrases, but in general it was easy to read and translate the whole text”.

Thus, the sound component included a different level of acceptance of the Gothic text on an emotional level: “The Gothic Bible has a certain **rhythm** [Maria makes a spiral movement of her hand away from her – D.N.]. And it can be **hypnotic**, it can be soothing. I studied the Gothic language during an emotionally difficult period of my life, and the Gothic language helped me to overcome depression. This emotional attitude to the text immersed me in another world. It’s a joy that you listen and understand. And the language flows through the text, and not through a set of separate grammar rules”.

“And later I listened to Beowulf in Old English. This time it was not my voice but the readings of professional actors who read the tale of Beowulf and of the battle of Maldon beautifully, with expression and without a Russian accent. This is how I studied both living and dead languages”.

After graduating from the Linguistics and Intercultural Communication program at Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University, Maria began to study Icelandic on her own and received a grant from Reykjavik University, lived in Iceland for about a year and attended a course in Medieval Studies there. Now she teaches the history of the English language, Gothic and Old Norse in German to German students at the University of Munich.

I decided to share this story because it serves as a confirmation of how effective a proactive approach to language learning is when based on a combination of visual, auditory and speech-motor strategies, on enhancing the emotional component and relying on parallel texts. This approach proves effective not only for the study of modern, but also of ancient languages, although they are not used for interpersonal communication nowadays.

Questionnaire for the study of ancient languages by polyglots

This interview prompted further research so as to determine the generalities and patterns of how polyglots learn ancient languages. Four polyglots took part in the study (three men and one woman), who know, in addition to many modern languages, several ancient languages (two to four languages). Their responses to carefully designed questionnaire helped elicit several general patterns.

The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Have you studied ancient languages?
2. Why is it important for you to study ancient languages?
3. How many ancient languages do you know and which ones?
4. What does it mean to you to “know an ancient language”?
5. At what age did you start learning ancient languages?
6. Was it your decision or was it determined by the curriculum?
7. In what order did you study the ancient languages?
8. How did their study correspond in time with the study of modern languages?
9. Do you have a “favourite” ancient language and why?
10. Was there any ancient language in which you felt a particularly intense progress (breakthrough)?
11. What did you do differently in this case?
12. How do your methods of studying ancient languages differ from studying modern languages?
13. Have you achieved the skill of writing texts in any of the ancient languages?
14. Have you achieved the skill of speaking any of the ancient languages?
15. What did you do for this?
16. How long did it take you to master the first of your ancient languages?
17. How long did it take you to master the last of the ancient languages you studied?
18. At what age was it?
19. How much time per day / per week / per month do you devote to maintaining ancient languages?
20. What types of classes do you use to support the learned ancient languages and what is the ratio of these types of classes over time?
21. What other questions would you like to add to this questionnaire?

A comparative analysis of the data obtained revealed some general patterns.

- Intrinsic motivation. All respondents unanimously pointed to the priority of internal motivation (although for three out of four people the study of one or two ancient languages was included in the university curriculum), as well as to independent study of subsequent languages.

- Two main types of motivation: 1) ancient languages as a tool for accessing primary text sources and, therefore, for a deeper understanding of cultures, 2) ancient languages as a tool for a deeper understanding of modern languages. All respondents acknowledged both types of motivation, but with varying degrees of priority and intensity. The specific answer was that “their grammatical and phonetic structure is very pleasing”.

- The age of the most active study of ancient languages is from 14–17 to 29 years.
- A set of languages. All respondents invariably admitted knowing Latin (to some degree). The popularity of other languages in descending order is: Old English (three people), Old Church Slavonic / Old Russian (two people), Old Icelandic / Old Nordic (two people), Gothic (one person), Ancient Greek (one person), and Old Irish (one person).
- The effectiveness of *parallel study of modern and ancient languages*. All indicated parallel study for at least one of the ancient languages: Latin in parallel with English, Spanish and French (one person); Old Icelandic in parallel with modern Icelandic (one person); Old Irish in parallel with modern Irish (one person); and even Ancient Greek in parallel with Serbo-Croatian. At the same time, everyone unanimously noted that ancient languages were useful in studying modern ones.
- “To be proficient in an ancient language” for all respondents predictably meant “to read texts”, “to be able to read without difficulty”, “to be able to read and translate”, and “to understand essential texts”. Only one of the respondents added “to have a large vocabulary” and introduced a cognitive component: “to understand grammatical structure, understand connections with modern languages”. And another noted: “to be able to speak at least at a basic level”.
- When answering the question “Which ancient language is your favorite?” and “Which ancient language have you experienced particularly strong progress in?” everyone named the same language: the one in which they “*did something differently*”.
- To achieve intensive progress in learning the ancient language, the *auditory component* turned out to be fundamentally important for the majority of respondents! Thus, those three out of four who noted “especially intensive progress in one of the ancient languages” unanimously indicated that they “actively communicated and listened [in Latin]” (one person), “studied [Ancient Greek] daily using the Assimil method: listening to audio, then shadowing, parsing, etc.” (one person), and “recorded the [Gothic] text on audio and listened to it for several months on headphones” (one person).
- Therefore, it seems natural that all four wrote that for them the methods of studying ancient and modern languages are “practically the same”, “the only difference is in fewer opportunities to use the language to communicate”.
- Each of the respondents mentioned certain ways to make up for this “insufficient communication”: in addition to listening to audio recordings in ancient languages, two respondents “communicated in Latin”; one of them “compiled a Russian-Latin phrasebook with a friend, wrote each other SMS and holiday postcards, which created the basis for more active understanding and use”; the third respondent “tried to write letters in Gothic to the one who taught me to read it, but did not receive an answer”. Grigory Kazakov’s story about his proactive approach to the study of Latin deserves special attention: “During my student years the popularization of Latin turned for me into a major creative project and helped actively study and internalize the history of European culture. This included 1) conducting active classes in Latin in the 1st year (I approached lecturers with a request to conduct classes in different groups), 2) collecting a “Latin museum”: a collection of objects with Latin inscriptions, 3) compiling a Russian-Latin phrasebook, which was published by the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies of Moscow State University (I was then a 2nd year student), and 4) creating and conducting an open course “The World of Latin” (when I was a 3rd year student). Together with my like-minded friend Vasily Prusakov (a medic by profession), we combined all this into the project “*Lingua Latina adhuc est viva*” (Latin is still alive)... I can say that Latin was the beginning of my professional activity: my first publications were devoted to the popularization of Latin, and the desire to spread interest among others laid the foundations for my approach to teaching, aimed at increasing audience motivation and using active forms”.
- “Unyielding” ancient languages. Two out of four respondents indicated that there were languages that they began to study, but did not achieve desirable results: classical Japanese and classical Chinese (one person) and Biblical Hebrew (one person). Among the possible reasons they named: “difficulties of the writing system”, “lack of phonetic transcription”, and “lack of interest in that culture”.

• Regularity factor. All respondents noted the regularity of retrieving the learned ancient languages, but with varying frequency: daily – “The plan is 10 minutes per day for Old Church Slavonic, 20 minutes for each of the others, often only 10 minutes are available” (one person); weekly – 3–4 or more hours a week (one person) or 1–2 hours a week (one person); and annually – “In principle, I read Ancient Greek regularly: about 2–3 months a year, 20–30 minutes a day” (one person).

■ Time factor. All four respondents spoke about a longer period of study of their first ancient language (from two semesters to 1–2 years) and a shorter period of study of the last of their ancient languages (two semesters / 3–6 months / 50 hours).

This observation about reduced efforts in acquiring subsequent languages finds an indirect explanation in recent neurophysiological studies. Using markers of language activity, measured with fMRI, four researchers compared native language processing in polyglots versus matched controls. Their research demonstrated that “polyglots (n = 17, including nine ‘hyper-polyglots’ with proficiency in 10–55 languages) used fewer neural resources to process language: Their activations were smaller in both magnitude and extent”. The researchers’ conclusion was that “the acquisition and use of multiple languages makes language processing generally more efficient” [6, p. 62].

Results

Thus, the survey of respondents made it possible to identify a number of strategies common to all polyglots that are effective in learning ancient languages:

- 1) Strong internal motivation: intellectual, emotional and aesthetic.
 - 2) The set of languages varied for each respondent depending on his interests, but mastery of Latin at one level or another was indicated by everyone.
 - 3) The effectiveness of parallel study of modern and ancient languages.
 - 4) The favorite ancient language for all respondents was the one in which they felt particularly intense progress and applied their own non-standard strategies.
 - 5) To achieve intensive progress in an ancient language, the auditory component turned out to be fundamentally important for the majority of respondents.
 - 6) All respondents noted that their methods of studying ancient and modern languages are not fundamentally different.
 - 7) The age frame for the most active study of ancient languages varied between 14–17 and 30 years.
- All respondents noted a reduction in the time it took to study their last ancient language compared to the first one, as well as the regularity of returning to these languages in the reading mode.

The conducted research, thus, contributes to the methods of mastering ancient languages both within the framework of a university program and in the process of their independent study.

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About the author:

Dina Nikulicheva, Doctor of Philology, is Chief Researcher at the Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences, and Professor at the Department of Scandinavian, Dutch and Finnish Languages at Moscow State Linguistic University. Research interests: Germanic and Scandinavian studies, psycholinguistics, language education. E-mail: nukulicheva@iling-ran.ru. ORCID: 0000-0002-9281-0726.

Сведения об авторе:

Дина Борисовна Никуличева – доктор филологических наук, профессор, главный научный сотрудник Института языкознания РАН, профессор кафедры скандинавских, нидерландского и финского языков МГЛУ. Сфера научных и профессиональных интересов: германистика, скандинавистика, психолингвистика, лингводидактика. E-mail: nukulicheva@iling-ran.ru. ORCID: 0000-0002-9281-0726.

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