

Languages for ALL

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Abstract

This article reviews and comments on *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages*, a recent English language edition of Kató Lomb's *Így tanulok nyelveket*, which was originally published in Hungarian in 1970. The article situates the work and provides a brief biographical sketch of the author, followed by an outline of the book. The article then examines more closely some of the issues raised by Lomb, such as adult learning, awareness in language learning, attitude versus aptitude, the use of a multipronged approach, taking personal responsibility, the role of regularity, as well as that of active and explorative reading, and the development of the four skills. Finally, it highlights the ongoing significance of Lomb's seminal work for language learners, teachers and researchers.

Polyglots have always excited the imagination of monolinguals.
Kató Lomb (2008, p. 178)

Introduction

Linguistic biographies on or by polyglots are far and few between, even though they would make interesting reading material, in particular, where the multiple acquisition and maintenance of languages is concerned. Some exceptions to this would be Charles Russel's biography of the Italian polyglot Cardinal Mezzofanti (1774-1849) that appeared in 1863, Barry Farber's classic *How to Learn Any Language: Quickly, Easily, Inexpensively, Enjoyably And On Your Own* (1991) and Bill Handley's *Fast Easy Way to Learn a Language* (2005), as would Dr. Dimitri Spivak's 1989 collection of interviews with polyglots in *Kak stat poliglutom* ("How one becomes a polyglot"). Whereas such writings by Russel, Farber and Handley fortunately appear in English, Spivak's does not, thereby remaining a closed book, so to speak, for those unable to read Russian.¹

There seems to have been a larger interest in polyglots in Eastern European countries (Gethin and Gunnemark, 1996, p. 318), which is also evidenced by another significant Eastern European linguistic autobiography, entitled *Így tanulok nyelveket* ("This is how I learn

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languages”). The book was written by the Hungarian polyglot Dr. Kató Lomb (1909-2003) and carries the subtitle *Egy tizenhat nyelvű tolmács feljegyzései* (“Notes of a sixteen-language interpreter”). Although originally published in Hungary in 1970, with reprints in 1972, 1990 and 1995, as well as translations into Russian, Latvian and Japanese (Alkire, 2005), a long-awaited English language edition has only appeared recently. *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages* has been skilfully translated by Ádám Szegi and Kornelia DeKorne, was edited by Scott Alkire, and can be freely accessed online at www.tesl-ej.org.

Readers may already be familiar with Kató Lomb’s name and some of her ideas on language learning from two earlier informative English publications (Alkire, 2005; Krashen & Kiss, 1996). However, the publication of *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages*, now makes a more direct and closer look at Lomb’s work available to a wider audience for the first time.

Kató Lomb: A Life in Many Languages

Dr. Kató Lomb was born in Pécs, Hungary, on 8 February 1909 and became one of few well-known female polyglots in the world. Largely unknown to the West, she slowly came to prominence following an interview with Steven Krashen in 1995 and a subsequent article (Krashen & Kiss, 1996). She had a zest for life, travelling and languages, as well as holding a doctorate degree in physics and chemistry. Working as an occasional language teacher and professional translator, Lomb was also one of the first professional simultaneous interpreters in the world. Languages and language learning were her passion, as is clearly evidenced throughout *Polyglot. How I Learn Languages*. Other major publications include: *Egy tolmács a világ körül* (“An interpreter around the world”) which appeared in 1979, *Nyelvekről jut eszembe...* (“Languages remind me...”) from 1983, and *Bábeli harmónia (Interjúk Európa híres soknyelvű embereivel)* (“Harmony of Babel (Interviews with famous multilinguals in Europe)”) published in 1988. Lomb mainly learned her languages as an autodidact later in life, following early linguistic explorations in her childhood and teens. This eventually resulted in a wide variety of languages with various degrees of proficiency: Hungarian (mother tongue); Russian, English, French and German, which lived inside her “simultaneously with Hungarian” and where she could “switch between any of these languages with great ease”; Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Polish, which generally required her “to spend about half a day” to brush them up; and Bulgarian, Danish, Latin, Romanian, Czech and Ukrainian, which she knew through translating literature and technical material (Lomb, 2008, p. xviii). Dr. Lomb died in Budapest on 9 June 2003.

Outline of the Book

The book has a clear layout and is divided into manageable sections that are easy to digest, whereby Lomb has kept the use of technical linguistic terminology to a minimum. The English rendition reads well and the translators have managed to maintain the various prose styles that Lomb uses throughout the book to convey her points (Alkire, 2008, p. ix). In addition, great care has been taken in providing translations and helpful explanatory footnotes in this “polyglot” text with regard to the variety of Lomb’s linguistic references, such as those in Hungarian, but also in Latin, German, French, Spanish and Russian, to name a few.

The book begins with a preface written by the editor, Scott Alkire, which provides some background information on Lomb, the book and the implications for language learning and second language acquisition theory. This is followed by the forewords to the 1970, 1972 and 1995 editions. The introduction then recounts Lomb’s own linguistic development and gradual acquisition of the 16 languages mentioned earlier.² The book continues with a brief discussion of what counts as a language (Chapter 1), why we (should) study languages (Chapter 2), the types of language to study (Chapter 3), and “easy” and “difficult” languages (Chapter 4). This is followed by sections on how to study languages (Chapter 5) and who the book is (and is not) for (Chapter 6), including a discussion of various language instruction methods (e.g. translation method, direct method, immersion method, accelerated learning, relaxation methods, et cetera). Lomb then spends four chapters on learning through reading (Chapters 7 to 10), which is a major component of her own study method, involving an active and explorative approach to the frequent use of books. These chapters are particularly worth a read. Subsequent to a description of which languages people study in Chapter 11, she then reflects on vocabulary learning, the role of context therein, as well as age and language learning in the next four chapters. This is followed by a discussion of the role of dictionaries and textbooks in Chapters 16 and 17, prior to zooming in on the topic of conversing in a foreign language (Chapters 18 and 19).

The book then moves on to a less theoretical and more practical approach. Chapter 20, “How I Learn Languages”, which could be seen as the heart of the book, describes how Lomb practically sets out on learning a new language. This chapter outlines her ten requests and seven prohibitions for “achieving an acceptable level of linguistic mastery within an acceptable time frame” (Lomb, 2008, p. 161).³ Language proficiency and (self-)assessment are the subject of the next chapter, prior to a demythologisation of the alleged existence of an innate “linguistic gift” in Chapter 22. Here, Lomb refers to several well-known male and female polyglots of the past, but also states: “Unfortunately, the famous polyglots of the past have not been accurately portrayed in regards to their abilities.” (p. 178)⁴ The book then draws to a close with information on language careers (Chapter 23), an entertaining look at Lomb’s interpreting

career (Chapter 24) and reminiscences from her travels (Chapter 25), before finishing with some reflections on language change (Chapter 26) and an epilogue.

Significance for Language Learners, Teachers and Researchers

In this section, I would like to highlight several issues touched upon by Lomb that may be of particular interest to language learners, teachers and researchers. This list is by no means exhaustive. Several points overlap and related topics can be found in more detail throughout the book.

Adult learners: never too old to learn

Readers should note that Lomb wrote her book with a specific kind of audience in mind, namely one that “doesn’t really exist: the Average Language Learner, or ALL” (p. 51). The ALL is aged between 16 and 96 and can be of any profession, and further on Lomb speaks about “adult language learners” (p. 61) and “an adult, a working person” (p. 63). The book, written by an adult language learner, is primarily aimed at adults, or more mature language learners, describing what they can do in order to become successful language learners. Age should not form a barrier to language learning and Lomb refers to the time available in retirement and the frequent use of mnemonics to keep learning in our later years. As an account of adult language learning, the book presents a detailed addition to other research carried out into adult learners as good language learners (Naiman et al, 1996).

Awareness in language learning: mindful repetition

Another point Lomb raises is the role and kind of repetition in language learning. Instead of the mere rote drilling typical of “immersion” methods, where “foreign language patterns are taught by endless repetition” (Lomb, 2008, p. 59) for many hours, which can easily turn into a form of mindless repetition, she recommends that repetition should be more mindful. Attention must be paid to reveal the theoretical connections, by thinking of what you are about to drill, so as to become consciously aware of the patterns and regularities in a language, such as grammatical rules. It could be argued that Lomb stresses the importance here of developing – and leveraging – one’s metalinguistic awareness, i.e. an awareness of how languages work, rather than merely relying on mindless drilling for successful language learning. Such awareness has been identified as a potential key factor in the learning of additional languages.⁵ This emphasis on attentive and mindful activity also applies to the repeated use of audio and audio-visual materials, such as radio, television, videos (and nowadays podcasts and online clips). Instead of just letting things play in the background, Lomb states that it is better to pay careful attention for brief periods:

The eternal rule holds here as well: you should do this for a short time but with full intensity rather than sitting around beside the radio or the tape recorder with your thoughts wandering among yesterday's experiences or tomorrow's hopes. (p. 94)

In sum, brief bursts of repeated attentive listening/watching are more effective than merely letting the tape roll, so to speak.

Attitude not aptitude: disposing of the myth of the “linguistic gift”

One of the more important messages in the book is Lomb's demythologisation of an innate “linguistic gift”, on which she spends a separate chapter (Chapter 22). Lomb claims, and I agree, that successful language learning is not so much due to having a special gift or ability, but rather the result of perseverance, motivation and dedication: “[S]uccess in learning anything is the result of genuine interest and amount of energy dedicated to it.” (p. xviii) This should come as a great support for people who claim that they are unable to learn another language, simply because they believe that they have “no talent” for it. As Lomb has shown, and as demonstrated by millions of other language learners worldwide, learning another language is more a matter of attitude than aptitude.

Storming the castle: a multipronged approach

One of my favourite parts in the book is Lomb's analogy between learning another language and storming a castle. The siege of a castle means continuous work and not just focusing on one particular thing. It needs to be attacked from all sides and is conquered gradually, bit by bit. One should be inventive and creative, using all the resources at one's disposal. Furthermore, with each little victory, a sense of achievement is obtained. This multipronged approach to language learning, also referred to as the “multiple track attack” (Farber, 1991), has been identified as a key characteristic of successful language learners, who use a variety of strategies and adapt these where necessary, based on their own experience (Kemp 2007, 2008; Rivers, 1996).

You are in charge: personal responsibility and the role of teachers

Taking personal responsibility is key in successful language learning. Lomb states that language learners should not rely predominantly on teachers, but should try and set their own course, in which teachers act as facilitators. In underling such taking charge, her views are in accordance with the self-direction and ownership that have been identified as characteristics of “expert learners” (Rivers, 1996). This is not to say that Lomb downplays the role of teachers in the language learning process:

“[M]y method is designed to supplement and accelerate teacher-guided learning rather than replace it.” (Lomb, 2008, p. 69) Whenever possible, she would always try to get access to a professional educator, or at least a native-speaking exchange student, so as to learn how to pronounce a new language correctly (p. 150) and to get feedback on written work, whereby she would start with free composition and gradually move towards translating into the new language as her confidence grew (p. 155). In this respect, teachers and helpful native speakers remain an invaluable resource for feedback and error correction.

Learning should be fun: interesting content

Throughout the book, Lomb stresses that foreign language learning materials should be of interest to the learner. This point is also made frequently by polyglot Steven Kaufmann in his book *The Way of The Linguist. A Language Learning Odyssey* (2005) and on his online blog.⁶ Language learners should select their own materials, which should be of interest to them. When learning another language, interesting materials will make it easier to keep up the motivation to work on and with the language.

Continuous tinkering: doing something everyday

Lomb suggests 60-90 minutes *daily* as a minimum for language learning, with a minimum of 10-12 hours a week (Lomb, 2008, p. 62). In order to acquire a language at a satisfactory level, one should “tinker” with the language on a daily basis: “Spend time tinkering with the language every day – if there is no more time available, then at least to the extent of a 10-minute monologue.” (p. 159) The point Lomb makes here is that a little bit more often is better than doing a lot, or too much, infrequently. This is also the reason why she recommends tying in language learning with one’s daily work, so as to make the learning process an integral part of one’s life. The monologue she refers to above, or rather the “autologue” as she prefers to call it, is an excellent means for language learning. If there is no-one around to talk to, then you can just talk to yourself, whether aloud or silently. It is a great way to work actively with the language and to learn to think in it. Above all, you can do it anytime, anywhere.

Learning vocabulary and grammar: active and explorative reading

Another point I would like to mention deals with Lomb’s perspective on learning grammar and vocabulary. In her view, grammar remains an important and essential part of language and should be seen as a “catalyst”. She is not much in favour of drilling rules of grammar, but recommends a more explorative approach: “[T]he knowledge you obtain at the expense of some brainwork will be more yours than what you

receive ready-made.” (p. 116) Learners should first try to figure out the rules by themselves through active reading and critical comparison, consciously asking questions as to why and how, rather than these being merely presented to them in a grammar book or by a teacher from the start. Taking such a pro-active approach will ensure better retention and internalisation of such self-discovered patterns. In addition, she argues that it is of major importance in learning to write.

Lomb also comments on various methods of vocabulary learning, such as making glossaries, learning words in bunches, guessing from context, repeated exposure, writing down phrases, using dictionaries and memorisation (by using mnemonics). These all have their pros and cons, but central once again is that learners should take an active approach, which will aid retention. Learners should personalise these methods by applying them to their specific situation and the vocabulary they want to learn. In combining and personalising these methods, retention will improve, since there are more nails to hang things on. In this regard, Lomb particularly underlines the importance of learning words in context, rather than on their own.

The above is the reason for Lomb’s insistence on using books (although not to the exclusion of speaking and listening practice) in learning another language, since these allow for frequent exposure to grammatical structures and vocabulary in context. A book is portable, can be turned to at any time and helps to create your own “person linguistic microclimate” (p. 77).

Technology and language learning: do not become lazy

Although Lomb does not mention this in her book, the same could be said of some current technological devices, such as laptops (with internet connection) and portable digital players. Their portability allows for similar exposure, but with the added benefit of accompanying audio material, thereby enhancing one’s personal learning environment. However, unlike a book these are dependent on sufficient battery power and – on a personal note – frequently provide unbeneficial distraction from the language learning task at hand. Lomb refers to a wide variety of modern electronic resources (television, radio, CDs, cassettes, et cetera) in her book, but one can only speculate what she would have made of CALL technologies, virtual learning environments and (interactive) online resources available to language learners today. I do not know whether or not she used such technologies or online resources in her own language learning (or maintenance), but Lomb indicates that technology has its place in language learning:

Even if we, the generation raised on books, view the effects of cinema, radio, and TV with anxiety in this respect, we must admit that these technological achievements are of enormous help in spreading culture, which can promote language learning. It cannot

be emphasised too strongly that the main purpose of language learning is to enable communication between speakers of different vernaculars, and technology can facilitate this. (p. 61)

Technology can – and often does – facilitate language learning, but Lomb would probably remind us to use it actively and mindfully in order for it to be effective, as we saw earlier in this article. Nevertheless, considering the fact that Lomb wrote another preface to the 1995 edition of her book, 25 years after its first publication, some more detail on how she viewed or may have used such CALL technologies and online language learning resources would have been a welcome addition.

Balancing the four skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking

Readers should not infer from Lomb's emphasis on reading in her method that she believes that the other three language skills, i.e. writing, speaking and listening, are less important. However, based on her own experience, and those of others, she is acutely aware that time constraints often play an issue in a balanced development of all four skills: "If you neglect any of these four skills you have only accomplished part of your goal. In practice, however, short-shrifting one or more often occurs. It is usually not for matters of principle but for lack of time." (p. 89)

As far as writing is concerned, Lomb refers to it in terms of noting down phrases in the context of vocabulary acquisition and working her way through written exercises in textbooks with answer keys, as well as free composition (so as to try out new structures and vocabulary acquired through reading) and eventually translation into the new language, as mentioned previously. Applied in this way, translation can prove useful in gradually widening one's linguistic comfort zone, when checked and used as a language learning tool (rather than as a means for producing professional translations intended for publication).

Lomb mainly discusses conversing in another language in Chapters 18 and 19. However, one of the places where Lomb also touches upon speaking and listening is in the context of pronunciation in Chapter 10, entitled "Reading and Pronunciation". Although books remain one of her favourite language learning tools, they do have one significant shortcoming (even audio books, as we will see in a moment): "Books, alas, cannot teach you exact pronunciation." (p. 89) No matter how much learners listen to radio broadcasts, other audio material or watch television (which should always be done in a mindful and attentive manner), correction by a teacher or native speaker remains indispensable in learning to pronounce the new language (as well as sound, stress, intonation and rhythm for that matter). Pronunciation does not have to be perfect, and speakers may have an accent, but language learners should be aware that incorrect pronunciation can change the meaning of a word, thereby hampering effective communication. In addition, Lomb emphasises that learning good pronunciation involves both listening *and*

speaking. Good pronunciation is not acquired by continuous listening alone, but learners must also practise pronunciation themselves. Even if pronunciation may be “one of the most difficult tasks of language learning”, as Lomb rightly points out, it often appears as the main benchmark “your knowledge is judged by when you first speak” (p. 90).

Conclusion

Not intended as an academic text per se, *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages* nevertheless touches upon many issues relevant to research into (multiple) language acquisition, maintenance and proficiency, in particular, with respect to adult learners. Overall, the book is a compelling and inspirational autobiographic read, providing a wide variety of effective language learning suggestions and strategies, as well as an invaluable insight into the personal linguistic journey of a remarkable female polyglot. As such, it would form a great addition to the library of language students, teachers, researchers, and not to mention aspiring polyglots: “If I have been able to infect only a few people, then I have achieved my purpose with this book.” (Lomb, 2008, p. xx) In my case, I believe she has.

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Notes

1. Although an English translation of some fragments can be found online on a “Polyglot” forum: http://how-to-learn-any-language.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=1489&KW=spivak&TPN=1, accessed online 28-12-2008.
2. Lomb states these 16 languages in her 1970 preface, but also began to study yet another language, Hebrew, in her eighties (Alkire, 2005, p. 18).
3. See Alkire (2005) for a detailed discussion of the language learning strategies advocated by Lomb here and their relation to SLA theory.
4. A similar sentiment is expressed by Kenneth Hyltenstam, one of few researchers in Europe who currently carry out research on polyglots, when he states that polyglots have “only minimally been the focus of systematic study” even though the “existence of exceptionally

multilingual individuals is well attested anecdotally” (Hyltenstam, 2008).

5. For an account of the role of metalinguistic awareness in third language acquisition, see Jessner (1999).
6. See: <http://www.thelinguist.blogs.com>, accessed online 28-12-2008.

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