



Getting to Grips with the Polish Language

Mastering a few basic pleasantries in Polish will always help you to get by when visiting the country – but just how easy is it to become more fluent in the language?

Text by Alison Hope

When it comes to learning a second language, Polish might not be the most obvious choice, yet it has certainly gained popularity since Poland joined the EU in 2004. Since then, more and more people have found themselves in Poland for many different reasons – on business, on holiday, or even meeting the future in-laws! An interest in Poland's rich culture and heritage, and wanting to be able to appreciate it further, is another reason to take up Polish, as is the challenge to master a language that has a reputation for having complex grammar structures and vocabulary that can be a bit tricky for most native English speakers. Chat to students attending Polish evening classes, and you quickly discover that everyone has

their own reason for being there. Daria Gabrynczyk, the Principal of 2nd Language, a London based language school that specialises in teaching Polish as a second language confirms this, "When asked why they have decided to learn this difficult language, our students answer that they often go to Poland for their holidays and they want to know the basic expressions, or they say that they have Polish friends who have learned their language, so now they want to learn Polish. A growing number of people are learning Polish because of their business relations with Polish companies. The funniest answers, though, are when students say that they wanted to learn a slightly unusual language – and I picked Polish at random".

Whatever the reason, being able to speak another language is always a valuable life-skill. This sentiment is shared by Dr Dagmar Divjak, lecturer in Polish from the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at the University of Sheffield who says, "Knowing the language and the culture is a skill that is both personally and professionally rewarding. Poland has a rapidly modernizing, dynamic economy, and bilingual English native speakers are always at a premium. This is particularly the case now that Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 is making it easier for Polish immigrants to enter the UK while specialists in Polish language and culture are still few and far between."

It would be wrong to assume that Polish was only a popular choice for those who have a Polish roots and are looking to feel closer to their heritage. "The majority of students taking up Polish are in fact British, although there are always a few so-called heritage students, but they're in the minority. Most of our students are modern Language undergraduates, but every year we get a few biologists, architects for example, who are also keen to learn Polish," confirms Dr Divjak. Making the decision to study Polish may be easy, but with so many options available, it can be confusing to know where to begin. While there are plenty of good self-study books and cds on the market – many written by highly re-



garded language teachers - there is really no substitute for a structured course in a classroom environment. According to Joanna Mrugalska, Course Content Coordinator at the IDEA Language Centre in Poznań, which offers a wide range of courses for Polish as a second language, self-study isn't necessarily a bad thing, however there are certain benefits to learning under the watchful eye of a teacher. "Most people need a teacher to eliminate errors and to help clear up some difficult issues," she says. For those who speak English as their first language, the Polish language presents quite a few unfamiliar concepts, such as nouns having a gender, or nouns taking a case. There is only so much that can be explained in a book, whereas with a teacher, it is

always reassuring to be able to ask "so, when do I use na, and when do I use po?" Studying Polish as part of a structured course also helps you to keep up the momentum. It is all too easy for the initial enthusiasm to wane as soon as deadlines at work or other aspects of life start to get in the way. With a regular class, you have a set time each week, where you can focus entirely on getting to get your head around the instrumental case and building up your vocabulary. Interaction with the other students is also very beneficial, as you can learn from the questions that they raise – and from their mistakes too. Being able to communicate in a new language is a fairly sociable pursuit, so you may find that

you make a few new friends at the same time. The social aspect of learning Polish is something that Daria Gabrynczyk is keen to encourage at 2nd Language. She organises regular trips to London's Polish restaurants, where students can practise their Polish in a real-life situation. "We touch upon Polish culture and traditions too, of course; and we quite often arrange for outings to Polish restaurants in London, where our students must place their orders in Polish," she says. In cases where students want to learn at a particularly accelerated pace, or want to tailor their language learning to a specific industry, one to one tuition is

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Dr Divjak from the University of Sheffield explains the relationship between Polish and other European languages:

"Polish is a Slavonic language. The Slavonic world is divided into three parts, which are roughly East, West and South. Polish is a West Slavonic language, just like Czech and Slovak, hence these languages are most similar to each other. Russian is an East Slavonic language and differs more from Polish than Slovak or Czech does. When it comes to learning Polish, prior knowledge of another Slavonic language is an advantage – but definitely not a necessity! Slavonic languages share grammatical oddities, for instance there is a quite a few phenomena that are found in Russian, Polish and Czech but not in English, Dutch or German. Once you've managed to get your head around them in say, Russian, you only have to tweak them a bit to be set for Polish and Czech too."



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Photograph Courtesy of 2nd Language

Group teaching sessions at 2nd Language in London - small but friendly classes

Useful Contacts

2nd Language – English and Polish Language Classes in Central London. www.2ndlanguage.co.uk

Idea Language Centre – Intensive Polish Courses in Poznań. www.idea-polska.com

Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies, Sheffield University. www.shef.ac.uk/russian



Photograph Courtesy of Idea Language Centre

Joanna Mrugalska, Idea Language Centre

usually the best option. Your local language school should be able to give one to one teaching based on your individual needs. Why not step up the intensity by taking an intensive course in Poland? This not only gives you an opportunity to immerse yourself in the language, you can also practise your Polish in various real-life situations – from ordering dinner in a restaurant each night, to going shopping and checking in at the airport. As the saying goes - practise makes perfect. This communicative approach is used at the Idea Language Centre, which offers intensive Polish courses in Poznań, where Joanna Mrugalska explains, "This method allows students to use the material acquired

during lessons in everyday life, which in turn is a good motivation for them".

Like most things in life, there are very few shortcuts to becoming fluent in Polish. Dr Divjak from the University of Sheffield recommends building up the vocabulary by learning a couple of words every day rather than trying to cram in a hundred words the night before an exam. She also suggests spending time with Polish people, who will help and encourage you in basic conversations. With large Polish communities in the United Kingdom and Ireland, it should be relatively straightforward to find some new friends, who will almost certainly be delighted that somebody is making the effort to learn their language and learn more

about their culture. Go on - impress the Polish girl who works in the local coffee shop by ordering your latte po Polsku!

Also keep an eye out for Polish language publications that are available in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Pick up a copy of Polish Express or Panorama, and test yourself – how much can you understand? Don't worry if you only get as far as understanding the text in the adverts or working out what the captions in the photographs mean, it's all about building up confidence and becoming familiar with the language. Similarly, one of the best ways to become familiar with how Polish sounds, is to tune into Polish radio and download podcasts. Radio Orła is a London based

internet radio station which broadcasts in Polish as well as English – whether you listen intently, or have it playing in the background, you'll soon find that you recognise more and more words. Tune in by visiting www.orla.fm.

Whatever your reason for learning Polish, you'll certainly find it rewarding. Next time you're struggling to get your head round the instrumental case, remember that there is no better feeling than the breakthrough moment, when you realise that you can take part in a conversation... and be understood, that you can follow a Polish film without subtitles, or you can understand everything that is discussed in a meeting with your Polish clients. ■