



Language learning as a unique talent: Polyglot perceptions

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Abstract

The axiomatic differences in language learner outcomes have fueled a growing amount of research into foreign language aptitude. Despite growing interest in individual differences between language learners, there remains a paucity of research on the perceptions of ostensibly successful language learners. Contrary to the maligned fortunes of language learners, that have prompted commissioned bodies to be tasked with finding possible solutions, the polyglot community continues to thrive and share stories of success at international polyglot gatherings. This paper uses a mixed methods design to assess the beliefs and perceptions of polyglots vis-à-vis foreign language (FL) learning as a unique talent. A questionnaire utilising a five-point Likert scale was administered to 513 polyglots from 71 countries, and a quantitative analysis of their responses was conducted. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of 13 polyglots' documents in order to elaborate on the initial findings from the questionnaire. The results indicate that the polyglots are divided on whether successful language learners are born with an aptitude for language learning. Nevertheless, they held that anyone can learn a second language providing other qualities are present. This study provides insight to the psyche of polyglots regarding their learning feats.

1. Introduction

An area of language acquisition research which has grown in significance due to developments in the cognitive sciences is the relationship between talent and language learning. Researchers often use the term aptitude interchangeably with talent; thus FL aptitude research addresses the notion of learners possessing a talent for language learning. As Wen et al. state, "Foreign language aptitude generally refers to the specific talent for learning a foreign or second language" (2017, p.1). Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) purport that FL aptitude research assesses whether "there is a specific talent for learning foreign languages which exhibits considerable variation between learners" (p.590). However, this increasing body of research has tended to focus on second language (L2) learners and neglect polyglots. Thus, Hyltenstam remarks that, "Research on polyglots is still very scarce" (2021, p.57) and that "Research on polyglots is only in its infancy" (2021, p.70). Indeed, Alkire believes it is important to ask, "why polyglots tend to be ignored in SLA research" (2008, p.10).

Educational psychologist, John Carroll, contributed greatly to early research on FL aptitude. His Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll & Sapon, 1959) and FL aptitude construct greatly influenced subsequent research and established the parameters within which subsequent research has been conducted (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003). Little empirical research was conducted on FL aptitude in the years following Carroll's seminal work. However, boosted by developments in cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience, "the bleak scenario for FL aptitude research began to improve slightly at the start of the twenty-first

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century" (Wen et al., p.6). Thus, in recent years "interesting and challenging reconceptualizations of aptitude have emerged" (Dörnyei & Skehan, p.593).

A review of the literature highlights the evolvement of FL aptitude research, and its expansion into the field of cognitive neuroscience. It is also notable, however, how little of this research has involved polyglots. As Rodda eloquently states, "Despite their extraordinary success in language learning, polyglots have received very little attention from researchers in the field of language acquisition" (2011, p.69). It is important to concede that polyglots may indeed possess an aptitude for language learning, but be unaware of it. Furthermore, it can be posited that one may have the proclivity to reject possessing a unique trait if that diminishes his or her accomplishments. Nevertheless, there is value in the perceptions of polyglots, and whether they attribute their feats to an innate ability or to other factors. Before proceeding with an outline of the methodology adopted for this paper, it is important to give an overview of the literature on FL aptitude.

The present study sets out to investigate the perceptions of polyglots with regard to whether they believe some people possess a unique talent for language learning. The following research question guides this investigation:

- 1) Do polyglots believe that language learning is a unique talent?

2. Background Literature

As previously stated, Carroll (Carroll & Sapon, 1959) laid many of the foundations of FL aptitude research. For Carroll, FL aptitude consisted of four components: phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability, and associative memory. Skehan (2001) summarises phonemic coding ability as the ability to code sounds in order to retain them for more than a few seconds. Grammatical sensitivity is the capacity to determine the functions that words have in sentences. Inductive language learning ability is the capacity to extrapolate rules from a corpus of material in a target language, and associative memory is the capacity to form links between native and target language words. It is these four components that the MLAT was designed to probe.

A series of models of foreign language aptitude have been developed in recent decades. Sparks and Ganschow (2001) proposed the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) model. Grigorenko et al. (2000) posited the Cognitive Ability for Novelty in Language Acquisition-Foreign (CANAL-F) theory. Skehan (2002) developed the Macro-SLA aptitude model which aimed to be compatible with developments in SLA research. Robinson sought to attribute the observable differences between language learner outcomes to FL aptitude. Robinson's Aptitude Complex and Ability Differential framework (2005) further re-conceptualised FL aptitude. For Robinson, "Cognitive resources implement cognitive processes drawn on by primary abilities involved in language-learning task/test performance" (2001, p.372). The Ability Differential Hypothesis holds that language learners have varying levels of cognitive abilities which leads to different aptitude complexes.

The High-Level Language Aptitude Battery (Hi-LAB) (Doughty et al., 2010) was developed to target language learners with a high level of L2 proficiency. The researchers at the University of Maryland postulated that the components of aptitude for high proficiency learners may differ from those of low proficiency learners. The Hi-LAB consists of constructs with associated measures which are intended to measure the language aptitude of test takers. Linck et al. (2013) report that high level proficiency is related to working memory, associative learning, and implicit learning. They state that the Hi-LAB test is effective at distinguishing between very successful language learners and other individuals. They report that "Results from a series of analyses indicate that the tests correctly classified high-attainment learners with up to 70% classification accuracy" (2013, p.555). Researchers continue to optimistically examine the effectiveness of the Hi-LAB. As Wen et al. state, "At a construct validity level

this is a very impressive test and it is likely to be a milestone for high-level aptitude testing for some time to come" (2017, p.12).

There is a growing amount of research conducted in the field of cognitive neuroscience which critically examines whether there are individual differences between language learners, and whether it could be said that some individuals possess a talent or high level of aptitude for language learning. Researchers have examined brain structure to ascertain whether it is an indicator of a high aptitude for language learning. They have reported that grey matter volumes in the left inferior parietal lobe (IPL) (Reiterer et al., 2009) and the right auditory cortices as well as gyrification (Turker et al., 2017) were higher in individuals with high overall language aptitude. Furthermore, according to Novén et al. (2019), higher cortical thickness in Broca's area is related to linguistic analytic abilities, and the anterior segment of the right arcuate fascicle is related to the ability to analyse grammar (Kepinska et al., 2017). In addition, Della Rosa et al. (2013) suggest that grey matter density in the left auditory cortex is linked to foreign language aptitude, and Golestani et al., (2011) report that grey and white matter volume in the left and right Heschl's gyrus (HG) is linked to phonetic ability.

Researchers have also assessed brain function in relation to FL aptitude. Jouravlev et al. (2021) report greater cortical processing efficiency in polyglots. Deng et al. (2016) link the efficiency of the left superior gyrus (LSTG) to language speaking outcomes. They conclude that "sound-to-word learning success is predicted by the regional spontaneous activities of 'task-positive' regions, such as LSTG, and 'task-negative' network regions" (2016, p. 76). Barbeau et al. (2017) suggest that functional activation of the left IPL is correlated to L2 reading speed post learning, and a number of studies (Karuza et al., 2013; Qi et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2015) found that the left inferior frontal gyrus (IFG) is linked to tonal vocabulary learning. Researchers continue to conduct research which links both the structural and functional aspects of the brain to FL aptitude. This research is significant in ascertaining whether successful language learners possess innate abilities which aids their acquisition process.

Researchers have also examined the cognitive and psychological state of multilinguals. Aronin and Hufeisen (2009) argue that polyglots possess a new quality of multilingualism, where the interaction of multiple languages creates a unique cognitive state that is greater than the sum of its parts. Meara (2007) builds on this by describing the polyglot's mental lexicon as a dynamic, non-linear system, suggesting that linguistic performance is an emergent property of highly interconnected and fluid networks. Finally, Henry (2017) focuses on the psychological and motivational aspects, stating that polyglots must manage a complex multilingual self and navigate unique interference patterns where various non-native languages compete for dominance within the speaker's identity.

3. Methodology

This mixed-methods study examines the perceptions of polyglots with regards to the role of talent in language learning. As Cohen et al. (2007) explain, mixed-methods research can "map out, or explain fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data" (p.141). This paper is based on data gathered during a PhD project which investigated a wider array of polyglots' perceptions. The research design consists of a questionnaire and document analysis. This enabled the researcher to sample a substantial number of the population, which is pertinent when positing their perceptions and beliefs. The qualitative data then allowed the researcher to gain a more nuanced understanding and elaborate on findings if required. "When used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each" (Ivankova et al., 2006, p.3). Moreover, mixed methods research "provides strengths that offset the

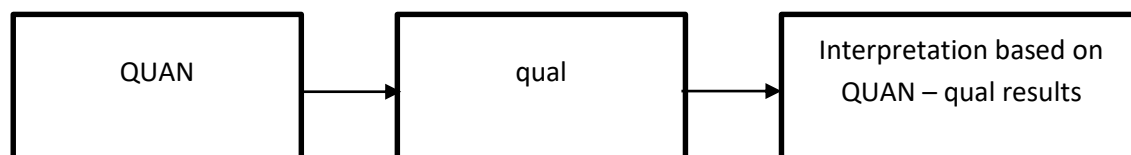
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weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.9).

This study uses the Explanatory Design illustrated in Figure 1.

QUAN → qual → Interpretation based on QUAN – qual results

Figure 1. The explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006)



The explanatory design facilitated the gathering of data to adequately answer the research question. It was pertinent to get a largescale understanding of polyglots' views. Questionnaires are the most effective and practical way of gathering such data. As Dörnyei (2007) highlights, a questionnaire allows the researcher to collect a vast amount of information from a large number of participants in a short amount of time. This was particularly pertinent in this study where the participants were dispersed throughout the world. The original study that this paper is based on utilised an online questionnaire consisting of 60 questions divided into 13 sub-scales. The items on language learning as a unique talent formed one of these sub-scales. The size and constitution of the polyglot population is an unknown entity. Sampling an unknown or concealed population can be methodologically challenging for researchers. This study adopts snowball (chain-referral) sampling for the quantitative phase. "With this approach to sampling, the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others" (Bryman, 2012, p.202). This method of sampling is often used to overcome problems associated with sampling concealed, shifting, unknown or isolated populations (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997).

The second phase of this explanatory mixed methods design consisted of a document analysis. The aim of the document analysis was to elaborate on the data collected in the quantitative phase. The selection of the polyglots for the document analysis was informed by the quantitative results from the first phase of the research. The sampling can therefore be described as purposive in nature. As Marshall (1996) notes, "qualitative researchers recognise that some informants are 'richer' than others and that these people are more likely to provide insight and understanding for the researcher" (p.523). Numerous studies have suggested that thematic saturation is reached before the contributions of 12 participants (Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2002; Namey et al., 2016). Subsequently, the documents of 13 polyglots which were used for this phase of the study were considered sufficient.

Participants

Before distribution of the questionnaire, it was necessary to define the term *polyglot* for the purpose of this study in order to set the parameters of who could contribute. The term polyglot is derived from the Greek poly (πολύς), meaning "many" and glot (γλώττα) meaning "tongues". It refers to one's ability to communicate in multiple languages. While it is known that a monolingual, bilingual, trilingual, quadrilingual, and quintilingual person is someone who has a command of one, two, three, four or five languages respectively, there is no precise number of languages that must be known to render a person a polyglot. Another variable in the discussion of multilingualism is the proficiency that one must attain to be considered to have a command of a language. Traditionally, researchers have viewed each language known by a

polyglot as a separate entity with its own competences equivalent to that of a monolingual native speaker (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Thus, a multilingual is a person who has achieved native-like proficiency in several languages (Bloomfield, 1935). Increasingly, researchers largely hold that multilingual speakers are not comparable to monolingual speakers and thus should be judged as their own subset (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). As Kemp opines, multilingual speakers use their different languages for different contexts and purposes and so it is highly unlikely that they will possess equal, native-like, proficiency in all the languages in their repertoire (Kemp, 2009). Defining multilingual competence is an arduous and complex task, and one which is unlikely to produce unanimity amongst linguists across the different research paradigms. Polyglots are defined in studies across the spectrum in regards to the number of languages spoken and the competency of their languages. For the purpose of this study, a polyglot has been defined as someone who speaks four or more languages to at least an intermediate level (B1 on the Common European Framework (CEFR)).

The online questionnaire was completed by 513 polyglots from 71 countries. Before commencing the research, ethical approval was obtained from the School of Education Ethics Committee at Durham University. Tables 1, 2 and 3 below detail the gender, age range and nationality of the respondents, respectively. Table 4 displays further information about the languages spoken by the respondents.

Table 1

Total number and sex of research respondents

GENDER	FREQUENCY	PERCENT (%)
MALE	248	48.3
FEMALE	265	51.7
TOTAL	513	

Table 2

Age range of questionnaire respondents

AGE GROUP OF RESPONDENTS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENT (%)
18–24	177	34.5
25–34	216	42.1
35–44	76	14.8
45–54	18	3.5
55–64	20	3.9
65+	5	1.0
MISSING	1	0.2
TOTAL	513	

Table 3

Nationality of questionnaire respondents

NATIONALITY	NO.	%	NATIONALITY	NO.	%
Afghan	1	0.19	Indonesian	1	0.19
Albanian	1	0.19	Irish	6	1.16
American	86	16.76	Israeli	3	0.58
American/Irish	1	0.19	Italian	17	3.31
American/Polish/Iranian	1	0.19	Jamaican	1	0.19
Argentinean	4	0.77	Korean	2	0.38
Australian	6	1.16	Lebanese	2	0.38
Austrian	8	1.55	Luxembourger	2	0.38
Azeri	1	0.19	Malaysian	11	2.14
Belgian	12	2.33	Mexican	9	1.75

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Bosnian	1	0.19	Montenegrin	1	0.19
Brazilian	17	3.31	Moroccan	2	0.38
British	35	6.82	New Zealander	1	0.19
Bulgarian	2	0.38	Nigerien	1	0.19
Canadian	21	4.09	Norwegian	4	0.77
Chilean	2	0.38	Pakistani	2	0.38
Chinese	21	4.09	Polish	9	1.75
Croatian	4	0.77	Portuguese	8	1.55
Cypriot	2	0.38	Romanian	6	1.16
Czech	7	1.36	Russian	6	1.16
Danish	5	0.97	Sammarinese	1	0.19
Dominican	1	0.19	Saudi	1	0.19
Dutch	29	5.65	Serbian	3	0.58
Ecuadorian	1	0.19	Singaporean	4	0.77
Egyptian	1	0.19	Spanish	10	1.94
Estonian	3	0.58	Swedish	6	1.16
Filipino	2	0.38	Swiss	7	1.36
Finnish	11	2.14	Swiss/Hungarian	1	0.19
French	13	2.53	Taiwanese	2	0.38
German	43	8.38	Taiwanese/Dutch	1	0.19
Greek	3	0.58	Tunisian	1	0.19
Guatemalan	1	0.19	Turkish	3	0.58
Japanese	2	0.38	Turkish/Norwegian	1	0.19
Hungarian	6	1.16	Ukrainian	4	0.77
Indian	12	2.33	Vietnamese	2	0.38
			Skipped question	5	0.97

Table 4*Overview of respondents' languages*

STATISTIC	VALUE
MINIMUM NUMBER OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN	4
MAXIMUM NUMBER OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN	15
MODE	4
MEDIAN	5
MEAN	5.31
STANDARD DEVIATION	1.77

Item 6 of the original questionnaire requested respondents to self-evaluate their languages according to the CEFR band descriptors provided. The responses were checked to ensure that all respondents met the minimum requirement of four languages at a B1 level or above. Table 5 details the number of languages spoken by the respondents.

Table 5*The number of languages spoken by the respondents (data available in original document)*

The 13 polyglots who contributed to the document analysis were not intended to be from the sample of polyglots that contributed to the questionnaire. However, due to the nature of snowball sampling which was used for the questionnaire, one is not able to rule out the possibility that the questionnaire reached them. The 13 polyglots who contributed to the document analysis were chosen for the diversity of their backgrounds, the richness of information that their documents contain, and the range of their language learning experiences.

Table 6 below details the polyglots whose blogs, videos, interviews and lectures contributed to the document analysis.

Table 6

#	Name of polyglot	Sex	Nationality	Upbringing
1	Benny Lewis	M	Irish	Monolingual
2	Luca Lampariello	M	Italian	Monolingual
3	Kerstin Cable	F	German	Monolingual
4	Steve Kaufmann	M	Canadian	Monolingual
5	Lydia Machová	F	Slovak	Monolingual
6	Richard Simcott	M	British	Sequential Bilingual
7	Emily Liedel	F	American	Monolingual
8	Olly Richards	M	British	Monolingual
9	Amber Gonzalez	F	American	Monolingual
10	Shannon Kennedy	F	American	Monolingual
11	Jonty Yamisha	M	American	Monolingual
12	Gabriel Silva	M	Brazilian/Canadian	Monolingual
13	Lindsay Williams	F	British	Monolingual

4. Results

Before reporting the results of the questionnaire, it is important to establish the reliability and validity of the research tool. In research using a multi-item measurement scale, Cronbach's alpha is the dominant measure of internal consistency, and thus scale reliability (Flake et al., 2017; McNeish, 2018). The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to carry out all quantitative analysis. As Dörnyei, (2003) recognises, L2 researchers are often trying to measure several different areas in a questionnaire and subsequently they cannot use extended scales. This usually results in lower Cronbach Alpha coefficients. Yet, Dörnyei warns that "even with short scales of 3-4 items we should aim at reliability coefficients in excess of 0.70; if the Cronbach Alpha of a scale does not reach 0.60, this should sound warning bells" (2003, p.112). Table 7 shows the Cronbach Alpha score for the sub-scale that was labelled *Language learning as a unique talent*.

Table 7

Cronbach's Alpha score for relevant sub-scale

SUB-SCALE	ITEM NUMBER	CRONBACH'S ALPHA
LANGUAGE LEARNING AS A UNIQUE TALENT	9–13	.819

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was further confirmed using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The Pearson correlation coefficients (r) indicate that there is a statistically significant correlation at the 0.01 level between the items of each dimension. This implies that the items in each dimension are internally homogeneous. The values for the relevant sub-scale are displayed in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Pearson correlation and significance label for each questionnaire item

Item no.	Item	Pearson correlation
	Dimension 1: Language learning as a unique talent	
9.	Successful language learners are born with an aptitude for language learning.	.739**
10.	Not everyone can learn a second language.	.657**
11.	Only gifted people can learn several languages.	.808**

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12.	Being a polyglot requires a special talent.	.831**
13.	The ability to learn languages is something you either have or don't have.	.779**

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

In order to establish the validity of the questionnaire, a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted. The PCA would provide evidence of construct validity by way of convergent and discriminant validity. If the items from one sub-scale load heavily on one component and have weak loadings on the other components then "loadings like these can serve as the basis for a convergent-discriminant validity argument" (Brown, 2010, p.34). As Lehmann states, "The most common approach to establishing convergent and discriminant validity is to demonstrate that multiple measures of a construct are (1) related, and (2) more related to each other than to measures of other constructs" (1988, p.411). Table 9 shows the rotated matrix for the items in the relevant sub-scale. The PCA revealed that the items in the sub-scale loaded on their intended component, and the items did not load on any other component. That suggests that there is convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 9

Rotated component matrix for relevant sub-scale. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax.

Descriptive statistics are "a useful way to summarise data and provide a description of the sample" (Marshall & Jonker, 2010, p.e4). The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale as shown in Table 10. Each point on the scale was given an ordinal value.

Table 10

The scale

SCALE LABEL	ORDINAL VALUE
Strongly agree (S.A)	1
Agree (A)	2
Neither agree nor disagree (N)	3
Disagree (D)	4
Strongly disagree (S.D.)	5

The sub-scale from the original questionnaire which is relevant to this paper contained five items which sought to ascertain the respondents' beliefs about language learning being a unique talent which is not possessed by all. Table 11 provides a summary of the respondents' responses. Table 12 outlines the descriptive statistics of the responses to this sub-scale.

Table 11

Summary of respondents' responses

Summary of responses
The respondents were divided over whether successful language learners are born with an aptitude for language learning. However, they opined that everyone can learn a second language. The majority of the respondents held that being a polyglot does not require a special talent. Only a small minority of the respondents held that the ability to learn languages is something that a person either has or doesn't have.

Table 12

Dimension: Language learning as a unique talent

ITEM NO.	ITEM	FREQUENCY %	S.A.	A	N	D	S.D.	MODE	STANDARD DEVIATION
9.	Successful language learners are	F	28	145	129	131	44	2	1.08

	born with an aptitude for language learning.								
		%	5.9	30.4	27	27.5	9.2		
10.	Not everyone can learn a second language.	F	11	45	27	161	233	5	1.04
		%	2.3	9.4	5.7	33.8	48.8		
11.	Only gifted people can learn several languages.	F	4	40	55	199	180	4	0.94
		%	0.8	8.4	11.5	41.6	37.7		
12.	Being a polyglot requires a special talent.	F	17	82	78	190	111	4	1.12
		%	3.6	17.2	16.3	39.7	23.2		
13.	The ability to learn languages is something you either have or don't have.	F	7	46	57	193	175	4	1.00
		%	1.5	9.6	11.9	40.4	36.6		

The quantitative phase of this study produced some interesting results that could be expounded upon during the document analysis. As Ivankova et al. state, the purpose of the second phase of a mixed methods sequential explanatory design is to "help explain, or elaborate on, the quantitative results obtained in the first phase" (2006, p.5). Although the 13 polyglots whose documents were analysed did not, per se, participate in the first phase of this study, examination of their documents nevertheless offers insight into the mindset and beliefs of polyglots which could not be gathered in a questionnaire consisting of Likert scale items. Thus, although the document analysis cannot be said to offer the rationale behind the responses of the same 513 polyglots who completed the questionnaire, extracting themes from the documents provides deeper insight to the thought process of polyglots whether expressing the same beliefs or offering contrary ones.

While the majority of the participants in the questionnaire rejected the notion that not everyone can learn a second language or that only gifted people can learn several languages, they were divided on whether successful language learners are born with an aptitude for language learning. The responses to the items of the questionnaire for this dimension (language learning as a unique talent) suggests that respondents believe that being a polyglot does not require a special talent, but that nevertheless, successful language learners may themselves be born with an aptitude for language learning. A characteristic may be prevalent in a certain group of people, but that does not necessitate that it is a prerequisite for belonging to the group. This nuance which emerges from the participants' responses will be expounded on when outlining the codes which emerged following analysis of the polyglots' documents regarding language learning as a unique talent.

The Issue of the Language Gene

Many of the polyglots discussed the notion of there being a language learning gene which accomplished polyglots are born with. Benny Lewis declares that "there is no language gene" (TEDx Talks, 2013). He further opines on his website that "I'm not gifted with languages. I don't have the 'language gene' (if such a thing exists). How do I know? I struggled with languages for years" (Lewis, n.d.-a). Steve Kaufmann also rejects the idea of some people being disposed to learning languages as opposed to others. For Kaufmann, "it's not a matter of the gene for language learning, an ear for language learning...it's all about attitude and your time you spend on the task with the language, your interest in it" (Steve Kaufmann, 2016). Kerstin Cable reiterates in her blog post that, "there is no gene, there is no magical talent, there is a benefit to practice" (Cable, 2013). The polyglots' claims find support in molecular genetics. Research on FOXP2 (Saad et al., 2025) demonstrates that genetic factors provide the neurobiological scaffolding necessary for speech rather than a blueprint for multiple language acquisition. The FOXP2 gene provides the necessary neural infrastructure for speech articulation and procedural memory, but its role is a prerequisite rather than a determinant. The literature surrounding the potential presence of a language gene is rooted in the research on foreign language aptitude. Modern day research has continued to examine the individual differences between language learners (Kidd et al., 2018; Yu & Zellou, 2019). Jouravlev et al. (2021) reported greater or optimised cortical processing efficiency among polyglots. However, the authors conceded that they "cannot conclusively determine the causal direction of the observed group difference" (p.71). The differences between the polyglots and the monolinguals could be due to extensive linguistic experience, or "it is also possible that individuals who eventually become polyglots represent and process language more efficiently from the start, even as they acquire their first (native) language" (p.71). The polyglots' stance witnessed in the documents supports the notion of extensive linguistic experience causing the differences reported by Jouravlev et al. (2021).

Increasing evidence reported in the literature suggests that there are individual differences amongst language learners. However, the reason why 36.7% of the participants in the questionnaire disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion of successful language learners being born with an aptitude for language learning may be due to the other codes which emerged from the analysis of the polyglots' documents, namely that whether one was born with an aptitude or 'gene' for language learning or not, does not definitively determine whether one can successfully learn several languages. The code that emerged on talent illustrates this point.

Talent

It is important to note that in the literature talent is sometimes used interchangeably with aptitude. As Doughty (2019) states, "Aptitude is conceptualized as a special talent for learning languages and a ceiling on success" (p.101). An analysis of the polyglots' documents revealed that they believed that other qualities were more important than any notion of talent in determining language acquisition success, thus the lack of any special talent (if one concedes that it exists) can be overcome, rendering it not a necessary requirement. This echoed the sentiment expressed in the questionnaire where 62.9% of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion that being a polyglot requires a special talent (item 12), despite only 36.7% of the participants disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that successful language learners are born with an aptitude for language learning (item 9). These two items may appear contradictory at a glance. However, as mentioned above, it is possible to reconcile between these two opinions. What can be extrapolated from these two items is that while many polyglots concede that successful language learners may be born with an aptitude for language learning, it is not a necessary requirement to becoming a successful language learner.

Luca Lampariello affirms that people's cognitive abilities may differ, but he also reiterates that that does stop anyone from learning a foreign language. He states, "It is certainly true that every person has different inclinations and abilities, but every one of us can learn a foreign language fluently" (Fabiani, 2021). Lýdia Machová also tussles with the idea of talent being a factor in language learning. In one talk she states that "I really think it's not about talent, it's about the approach that we have to language learning. And to be quite honest, I think that for many people not being talented is actually just an excuse" (Machová, 2018). Yet, in the same talk Machová concedes that, "I personally think that if I have some talent for languages that it helps me...maybe...15% more than other people who are not talented". Liedel acknowledges that "There is undoubtedly some variation in 'talent', but I think the most important variation is in motivation. If you are really motivated to learn a language, you can...regardless of what you think your inborn ability is" (Liedel, n.d.-a). Olly Richards holds that "Talent plays only a small role in learning" (Richards, n.d.-a). For Gabriel Silva, "talent in terms of learning languages is actually somewhat irrelevant. There are many other things that are a lot more important" (Silva, 2016).

The beliefs and perceptions of polyglots regarding the notion of talent being a prerequisite to becoming a polyglot are insightful. With growing evidence for certain differences between language learners in the research literature, there may be a tendency for aspiring language learners to conclude that they do not possess the predisposition to succeed. However, the polyglots' documents reveal that some of the polyglots (e.g. Benny Lewis and Olly Richards) report that they were not always successful language learners. They did not display talent for language learning at an early age. However, they were able to become successful language learners, and they ascribe this success to other than a natural talent for language learning. This suggests that talent is considered only one dimension for successful language learning, and it is something that can be overcome with other characteristics. One important characteristic that was emphasised in the polyglots' documents was the requirement of exerting effort in language learning.

Effort

One of the main reasons why the polyglots were averse to attributing their feats in language learning to a special gene or talent, was because of the belief that this diminishes from all the hard work they have exerted in learning their languages. This was a constant point raised by the polyglots. Richard Simcott argues that "...by labelling people as talented or as a genius or as good at something naturally, you actually diminish what that talent or a genius is. You take away from what that person has achieved" (Polyglot gathering, 2019). Moreover, "...using the word talent doesn't really do justice to the effort that goes into the preparation and to the learning of these languages" (Polyglot gathering, 2019). This sentiment is echoed by Emily Liedel. She states, "I don't think it is a good idea to call me a language genius, just as most people shouldn't be called geniuses, either. Labeling someone a genius doesn't acknowledge all the hard work that he or she has put into mastering a skill" (Liedel, n.d.-a). Shannon Kennedy opines that for polyglots, "99.9% of the time it isn't natural talent or luck. It's hard work" (Kennedy, n.d.). According to Lampariello, "...there are no shortcuts to this process (language learning). You only get better with time, effort, and deliberate practice" (Lampariello, n.d.-a). Moreover, Yamisha states that many language learners "dramatically underestimate the amount of time and effort necessary to learn a new language" (Yamisha, n.d.-a). The connection between language learning and effort is well established in the literature, and is often described as a facet of learner motivation (Al Shaye et al., 2014; Dornyei, 2005). Empirical research has established a connection between learner effort and learning outcomes. Yeung and McInerney (2005), purported that effort exerted was one of the most significant factors in learner achievement. Furthermore, Özer (2020) concluded her study by stating that, "Students with high achievement exerted more procedural, substantive, focal and

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overall language learning effort and less non-compliant behaviors than those with lower achievement" (p.1364). Another important characteristic which contributes to successful language learning which emerged from the polyglots' documents was the need to possess passion.

Passion

The Dualistic Model of Passion defines passion as "a strong inclination toward a specific object, activity, concept or person that one loves (or at least strongly likes) and highly values, that is part of identity, and that leads one to invest time and energy in the activity on a regular basis" (Vallerand 2015). For Lampariello, a passionate language learner will fare better in specific tasks such as memorising vocabulary. He states that, "In order to improve your ability to recognize and memorize new words and expressions you need to be interested in and passionate about what you are doing" (Lampariello, 2012). Indeed for Benny Lewis, passion is the one single characteristic which separates successful language learners from unsuccessful ones. He states, "After years of investigating what separates successful language learners from unsuccessful ones, I believe I have found the one thing that those who ultimately succeed and speak the language fluently, all have in common...It's passion" (Lewis, n.d.-b). Kaufmann adds that "It is up to each learner to find his or her own path to fluency in the language of their choice, which means searching for things that attract them, and then pursuing them with passion" (Kaufmann, 2020).

The polyglots' sentiments about passion are supported in the literature. Northwood (2014) has posited that passion is associated with learner motivation. In an empirical study, Lake (2016) reported a positive correlation between harmonious passion and L2 proficiency. This affirms the belief of Lewis that passion can lead one to succeed in language acquisition. Chen et al. (2021) state that, "the findings of this study underscore the fundamental importance of passion in the L2 realm and how it may contribute to both L2 learning and general life outcomes" (p.2774). This supports the statements of the polyglots quoted above about the significance of passion as a characteristic of a successful language learner.

5. Discussion

This study sought to investigate the beliefs and perceptions of polyglots regarding language learning as a unique talent. Researchers tackling the innate abilities of language learners use different terms to refer to these innate abilities. They are referred to as an aptitude, a gift, a talent, a gene, amongst other terms. The findings from this study suggest that the polyglots are divided as to whether successful language learners are born with an aptitude for language learning. However, there is also the suggestion that regardless of their innate abilities, language learners can overcome shortcomings if they possess other key characteristics. This is reflected by the sizeable number of participants in the questionnaire who rejected the notion that not everyone can learn a second language. There is a growing amount of empirical research which reports differences in language learning aptitude attributable to an advantageous neurocognitive profile. For example, Turker et al. (2018) report a link between the auditory cortex and linguistic ability. There are a myriad of other studies which report innate differences between language learners (e.g. Assaneo et al., 2019; Chandrasekaran et al., 2015; Mamiya et al., 2016; Qi et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2015). However, the document analysis highlighted two key reasons why polyglots may be hesitant to attribute their language learning feats to innate abilities. Ostensibly, the first reason is that attributing their language learning achievements to an aptitude that they were born with negates or diminishes the effort they exerted, and the time they invested in learning their languages. However, it is feasible that the

polyglots possess the individual differences which are highlighted in the research literature, and that they, nevertheless, still exert themselves. While some of the polyglots conceded that they may be more talented than other language learners, they were keen to stress their belief that there are other factors which are more significant in determining one's language learning success. This mindset was also reflected in the questionnaire where the overwhelming majority of the participants expressed that anyone can learn a second language, and that one does not need to be gifted to learn several languages. It can be inferred from these responses that regardless of whether one is born with an aptitude for language learning, they can still learn a foreign language. This point is encapsulated by the polyglot Lindsay Williams. She states:

Research has found that there is such a thing as 'language aptitude'. In other words 'how well suited you are to language learning'. So, that's basically "language talent", right? I don't see it that way. And besides, simply having good language aptitude isn't a sign of being able to effortlessly learn a language. There's still going to need to be some active learning that takes place. And sure, someone without as much 'language aptitude' may take a little longer, but that doesn't mean they can't learn too. (Williams, n.d.)

The second reason why the polyglots appeared hesitant to attribute their language learning feats to a special gift or talent is their past struggles with language learning. Several of the polyglots whose documents were analysed expressed that they struggled with language learning when they were at school. The logical conclusion would either be that they were not born with an aptitude for language learning, but rather started to excel when other factors were actualised. Alternatively, the past failings of the polyglots suggest that an aptitude for language learning reported in the research literature is not enough to guarantee success. Language learning is a multifaceted undertaking and requires a number of elements for success. Two of these elements that the polyglots highlighted is the need to exert effort and also possess passion.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the beliefs and perceptions of polyglots vis-à-vis language learning as a unique talent. The need for such a study stems from the fact that "If multilingualism is indeed one of the great achievements of the human mind...it is regrettable that few linguists have studied polyglots and what it is they know about language learning" (p. vii). Rodda (2011) concurs that if polyglots' successful language acquisition "stems from factors other than natural talent...their experiences become highly relevant for the typical learner" (p.70). The polyglots were divided over whether successful language learners have an aptitude for language learning which they acquire at birth. However, they expressed the belief that anyone can learn a second language, and that one does not need to be gifted or have a special talent to learn several languages. The polyglots held that effort and passion were more pertinent to language learning success than anything in one's genetic makeup. This study contributes to the discourse on language acquisition and foreign language aptitude. It provides insight to the mindset of successful language learners, and challenges the notion that only those with innate abilities can succeed. Although a robust mixed methods research design was adopted for this study, there are certain limitations that should be mentioned.

Firstly, this study utilised snowball sampling to attain the participants. Snowball sampling is often the choice of researchers when studying a hidden or unknown population. However, there are certain limitations of snowball sampling which are well documented in the literature. One of these limitations is the fact that the participants are not randomly selected, but dependent on the choices of the participants who are initially contacted. This may lead to selection bias and render the researcher unable to make claims of generality from the sample to the wider population (Griffiths et al, 1993). The generation of a large sample helped to increase the precision and reliability of the findings. In addition, such is the nature of this research that its value does not lie in being able to generalise the findings to the entire population of polyglots.

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Another limitation of the study relates to the participants of the study. The questionnaire which was used during the quantitative phase of this study was written in English. It was not translated into any other language. As a result, only polyglots who spoke English could contribute to the study. Although, it is uncommon to come across a polyglot who has not prioritised English as one of the first foreign languages that he or she learns, there are no doubt polyglots in the world who do not speak English, and thus were unable to be a part of this study.

Finally, the study was limited in the sense that the researcher was unable to independently assess the language level of the more than five hundred participants who participated in the questionnaire. For the purpose of this study a polyglot was defined as someone who speaks four or more languages to at least a B1 level on the CEFR. Thus, the level of one's language was a determining factor as to whether or not he or she could participate. The assessment of one's language was left to the self-assessment of the individual polyglots, and they were provided with band descriptors for the CEFR. There are language tests in several languages which assess the level of one's language and then equate it to the CEFR. However, it was considered impractical to require all participants to provide evidence of their language levels.

There is scope for further research on polyglots and language learning aptitude. As Biedron and Pawlak point out, "Very little is known about the IQ of linguistically gifted individuals" (2016, p.168). Furthermore, "...it is not possible to decide on the basis of available empirical data whether superior memory abilities in gifted L2 learners are inborn or, rather, evolve as a result of multiple experiences of FL learning" (2016, p.170). This study contributes to the research on polyglots and language aptitude, however, there remains the need for further research.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Voke Efeotor is a researcher from England, based in Saudi Arabia.. His research interests include foreign language aptitude, polyglotism, individual differences in second language acquisition, and mixed-methods research design. This paper draws on data collected during his doctoral research project, which investigated the beliefs and perceptions of polyglots regarding a range of factors related to successful language learning.