

My story

Sylvia Brown works as office manager at Primary Languages Network, a Corporate member of ALL.



I was born in Prague in what was then Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and my language journey has definitely been shaped by that fact.

My first language is Czech. My Mum came from Slovakia and even though she mostly spoke Czech in the house, I got to hear her language, and her particular dialect of it, from an early age. Slovak was also common then on radio and TV - so much so that most people of my generation find it hard to believe that children today are growing up not being to understand each other.

My Mum was also a German teacher. There would always be classes going on in our kitchen and plenty of books around our house.

Czech Republic when I was growing up was a country with limited freedoms, but thanks to my Dad's technical abilities, we got to watch German and Polish TV too. That way we could experience much more music and film than most of our peers. And, of course, soak up those languages.

When I was 8, I started attending a specialist school with extended language teaching and learning of Russian. As in the other Eastern bloc countries, Russian was compulsory, but at the time I did not see it as an oppression. I loved learning poems and performing at shows. Needless to say, my Russian teachers, often wives of military officers stationed near my school, loved me back! My father, who was close to several political dissidents, must have found this quite embarrassing.

I started learning English when I was 10 and if children's rhymes in Russian had once been the thing, the world of tapes of Pet Shop Boys and my Dad's Beatles records became a whole new world of motivation.

When I was 15, the world around me changed. I still got to spend my 1st year at secondary school learning Russian. I remember listening to an audio version of War and Peace and loving it so much I picked up the book - in the original. Something that my children find akin to flying to the Moon!

But, Russian was definitely out by that point and I got to pick up Spanish instead. I went on to study English and Spanish at University.

In the 1990s, in a country newly opened to visitors and businesses from around the world, being confident in languages was definitely a great advantage. I worked for a rental agency who specialised in finding flats and houses for English speakers. I met lots of very interesting people, made friends for life and learnt a lot in the field of business too.

As part of my degree, I didn't just learn about the languages but, of course, also the cultures of English- and Spanish-speaking countries and as soon as I could I travelled to England, Ireland and Spain. In 1995, I visited Northern Ireland. Being there at a pivotal time in its history has sparked a particular interest for me in the Northern Irish Conflict. I later got a grant to Salford University to work on a dissertation on that topic... and a trip from there to Manchester that hasn't really ended yet, nearly 25 years later.

My first job in Manchester was for a business working with airlines and airports internationally. My knowledge of Czech, Polish, Slovak and Spanish meant I could help grow the business in those parts of the world.

My love of languages never really left me. I decided to formalise my German knowledge and earn a GCSE. I even got to work with amazing teachers and researchers focusing on early language acquisition and connections between language, thinking and learning. Now, I love working at Primary Languages Network. I may be behind the scenes but I still get to do my own little bit to help inspire children to love and learn languages and discover the world.

I love seeing my own children learn different languages and practice their Czech. They may not be fully bilingual, but they certainly feel proud of their heritage. I see how it opens them up to different experiences whenever we travel together. I chat to my daughter who learns Spanish, and get the two learning French to be **my** teachers for once, to help them with their learning. I also volunteer in my local library running toddler Storytime. There are some 30 languages spoken in my community, something we try to cherish and celebrate in our sessions.

I am excited to see my daughters taking more interest in Czech and showing off every time we visit the family. We have a European road trip planned where we'll get to try out our French, German, Slovak and Polish again.

I am very proud that doing that is, for us, totally part of the experience. I cannot imagine it any other way.