

On Languages

Language skills can no longer be regarded as an optional extra to a well-equipped society. Rather, they are a key indicator of how willing and prepared we are to operate in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world.

Yet evidence points to a long-standing deficit in UK education and research. And this applies not solely to the UK – evidence from America and Australia point to a wider ‘Anglophone problem’.

The Academy has repeatedly shown that languages are essential for employability, trade, business and the economy, security, diplomacy and soft power, research, social understanding and cohesion. Furthermore, learning languages has been shown to have broader cognitive benefits.

Employability

In an increasingly hyper-connected, global economy, it is essential that young people are equipped with the necessary skills to compete with peers from across the globe in an international labour market.

Research commissioned by the British Academy has shown that half of UK SMEs agree that graduates who speak only English are at a disadvantage in the jobs market, 70% agree that future executives will need foreign language skills and international experience, and that multilingual employees have greater chances of promotion than colleagues with only English.

Further evidence gathered by the British Academy also found that employers, even those who do not explicitly value language skills, are seeking employees with an international outlook, a global mind-set and cultural intelligence.

Trade and business

To meet the needs of existing and future markets across the globe, and to increase exports to meet the Government’s £1 trillion export target by 2020, businesses need staff with language skills and inter-cultural awareness.

Research commissioned by UK Trade and Investment has shown that a lack of foreign language skills is costing the UK up to £48bn a year, or 3.5% of GDP. The language industry in the US alone is worth \$15bn and enables US businesses to reach foreign markets worth \$1.5 trillion. The British Chambers of Commerce found that 62% of non-exporters cite language as a barrier, and 55% cultural factors, when deciding if, when and where to export.

Research commissioned by the British Academy found that 83% of SMEs were operating through English only and more than half of SMEs agree that additional foreign languages would be helpful to extend business opportunities in future.



Security, diplomacy and soft power

The lack of language skills among British officials and armed forces is both embarrassing and risks putting the UK at a competitive disadvantage.

A government's language skills are a key indicator of how equipped they are to operate effectively within the fast-changing landscape of global engagement. Every government department and agency consulted for the Academy's Lost for Words inquiry acknowledged that language skills are important for meeting their objectives and will become increasingly important in the future. The UK is currently under-represented at International Organisations such as the EU and UN due to insufficient language skills.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has called for 'more skilled diplomats who are immersed in language and culture'. The Army Language Strategy includes a requirement for all officers to demonstrate speaking and listening competency in a foreign language to be eligible for promotion. The Metropolitan Police have recognised the need for officers with language skills to engage with communities across London more effectively.

Research

A lack of foreign language skills will limit the engagement of UK born and educated researchers with international projects.

As 90% of the world's research is undertaken outside the UK, it is critical that UK researchers are in a position to collaborate with the very best researchers from overseas. Language skills also act as a vehicle to access knowledge and sources in other languages. For example, within 20 years, it is predicted that most pages on the internet will be in Chinese and the proportion of internet usage conducted in English is already in decline.

Research into languages themselves can lead to new understanding of human cognition and culture, can help develop new products for the multi-lingual communications industry and have a direct bearing on a number of national and global challenges, such as security, terrorism and international crime.

Cognitive Benefits

The cognitive benefits of language learning for UK citizens of all ages could be huge.

Research has shown that bilinguals score better than monolinguals in problem solving, multitasking and prioritising tasks and have been shown to outperform monolingual peers in literacy and even mathematical tasks. Wider benefits include the prevention of the onset of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

The British Academy has funded researchers at University College London to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research and current practice in this area, and its policy implications across a wide range of topics including executive function, literacy, health, social and affective cognition, and intercultural understanding.

Languages and language learning in the UK

7.7% of the population of England and Wales has a first language other than English. School children in London speak over 300 languages, with estimates for Manchester and Birmingham at 200 and 108 respectively. 15% of pupils in state-funded secondary and 19.4% in state-funded primaries in England speak a first language other than English. Yet only one third of these bilingual students take a qualification in their mother tongue.

Registration for modern foreign language degree courses, and at A-level and GCSE has been in decline. Evidence shows a regional and socio-economic divide with children in Kensington four times more likely to be enrolled for a language GCSE than children in Middlesbrough. Modern languages make up nearly 10% of all A-Level entries at independent schools compared to just 3% in the state sector.

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