



By: *Harvey Morris*

A New Year's Resolution for UK policymakers: boost language teaching



Learning a language is a popular New Year's resolution that is apparently shared even by the notoriously monolingual British.

A **survey** by the British Council, which tracks language-learning trends, found that as many as one in four UK adults would consider putting it on their list of self-improving pledges on January 1.

Add to that the fact that the British are among the world's most prolific downloaders of foreign language apps and they emerge not so much as inveterate monoglots as enthusiastic would-be linguaphiles.

But other numbers indicate they are being let down by a school regime that has failed to prioritise foreign language-learning to the detriment of pupils' personal fulfilment and even the national economy.

A parliamentary **report** last year described foreign language learning in England as consistently poor when compared with other countries.

Some level of language learning is compulsory from the ages of seven to 14 in English schools but has no longer been required for older exam-level pupils since 2004.

The number taking GCSE language exams from around age 16 has since dropped from more than 550,000 to just over 370,000 in 2024. English pupils typically spend half the time on language studies as some of their European peers.

Why learn another language?

Spanish vies with French for top choice, while once popular German is now in almost terminal decline.

Seven out of 10 parents recently polled by the government-funded National Consortium for Languages Education said they wanted compulsory language study for their children in secondary schools. Half expressed regret they had never learned another language

themselves.

In its latest annual **survey** in November, the British Council identified the main concerns within the teaching profession, including a lack of confidence and language expertise among teaching staff and a lack of funding.

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A packed, exam-focused national curriculum, geared to future employment prospects, had also tended to squeeze out the humanities, including languages. Why learn another language, the system seems to be saying, when these days everyone speaks English?

There has been an evident downside in the spread of global English as the lingua franca of commerce and diplomacy. As Australian linguist and academic Joseph Lo Bianco has **written**: "If it is a disadvantage to not know English, it is a double handicap to know only English."

The language deficit

The disadvantage, in the case of the UK, extends to the economy. A 2022 study by the Rand research organisation and Cambridge University predicted that a decline in exam-level language study was likely to have negative effects on the UK's ability to compete internationally.

It estimated that every £1 spent on teaching French, Spanish, Arabic or Mandarin could produce returns of £2, while breaking those same language barriers could increase UK exports annually by about £19 billion.

Contrary to the perception that may have grown in UK schools that languages are an optional extra that will not help pupils get a job, the study found that multilingual individuals potentially earn higher wages and

do better in the labour market.

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The language deficit may even be impacting Britain's diplomatic standing. Former UK diplomat Ian Proud **lamented** in The Spectator magazine only last week that almost three quarters of Britain's ambassadors were not fluent in the language of the countries where they served.

The language issue inevitably arose following the Brexit referendum and the UK's subsequent departure from the European Union. In the wake of the 2016 vote, some linguists predicated an upsurge of "linguaphobia" among the inward-looking British that could shut down economic opportunities and hinder ties with the rest of the world.

Brexit has certainly had an impact on the availability of European teachers and on contacts between young Britons and their continental contemporaries.

Spanish was the top choice

Post-Brexit visa rules added to the costs of hiring European language assistants, a further blow to struggling school language departments, while the UK's departure from the Erasmus+ programme cut off young people on both sides of the Channel from its cross-border student exchanges.

There has been speculation that the Labour government could rejoin Erasmus as part of closer post-Brexit ties with the EU, although UK officials have so far remained non-committal.



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One senior UK diplomat was quoted last year as saying Britain originally opted out because its poor foreign language skills made membership too expensive to justify. To students who felt deterred from studying languages at school, that may have sounded like victim-blaming.

A U-turn on Erasmus in the coming year, already backed by a narrow majority of voters, would be a signal of UK intentions towards Europe as well as a readiness to spend money on enhancing language learning.

Those who missed out on language studies at school still have the option of teaching themselves.

The Covid-19 lockdowns saw an international boom in online language-learning apps in which the UK led the way. Providers said that Spanish was the top choice in the UK market, with users motivated by planning for a foreign break once travel restrictions were lifted.

A spokesman for Duolingo, the market leader, **told** the BBC at the time that the interest in learning another language might reflect a cultural change. "The UK now sees real value in learning a language for fun, not because they have to."