



Languages in the UK

A call for action

From the four UK-wide National Academies: The British Academy; with the Academy of Medical Sciences; the Royal Academy of Engineering; and the Royal Society



With



Summary

The UK has the potential to become a linguistic powerhouse. If it did, it would be more prosperous, productive, influential, innovative, knowledgeable, culturally richer, more socially cohesive, and, quite literally, healthier. To achieve this, concerted and coordinated action is needed, beginning with a systematic policy approach across all sectors of education, but extending across social, economic, and international policy. The four UK-wide National Academies recognise the need and benefits of action and ask Government to:

1. Engage with the coalition of organisations who stand willing to explore the steps needed;¹
2. Adopt and implement a national strategy for languages.²

1 The organisations involved are the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), The British Academy, the British Council, and Universities UK. They plan to publish proposals in 2019.

2 There have been other recent calls for a national strategy: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2015), [Manifesto for Languages](#); Coussins and Harding-Esch, 'Introduction' and Kelly 'Conclusion', in Kelly (ed.) (2017), *Languages after Brexit: How the UK Speaks to the World* (Palgrave Macmillan); Cambridge Public Policy SRI (October 2015), [The Value of Languages: Ideas for a UK Strategy for Languages](#).

The importance of languages

English is fundamental to the UK. But the UK itself, as well as the world beyond, is multilingual. Multilingualism is a natural condition in which humans have long thrived and learned to be creative and tolerant. In our globalized world, there is even an element of truth in the claim that ‘monolingualism is the illiteracy of the 21st century’.³ If we want to enhance both our engagement with the rest of the world and our national social cohesion, we need our citizens to be better at languages other than English and to value them more highly—European, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, South American, and indigenous UK languages (such as Scots, Gaelic, and Welsh). Some languages have more strategic importance than others,⁴ but that does not make them more valuable in every respect, since learning any language, including ancient ones, brings multiple benefits.⁵

Having competence in more than just English gives citizens windows onto other worlds; it broadens their mental horizons; it does so in a visceral way, by teaching them to produce unfamiliar sounds; and it makes them more likely to be curious and respectful when encountering other cultures and communities,⁶ as almost everyone does on a daily basis in the UK, where hundreds of languages are spoken.

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The ability to communicate with others who don’t speak English is not the only valuable skill that language-learning gives the workforce; another is a mindset of cultural agility, that enables people to be productive in environments where collaborators or competitors are international and speak several languages (whether or not they include English). Lacking language skills leads to the large-scale loss of economic, social, cultural, and research opportunities. For example, the economic cost of our linguistic underperformance in terms of lost trade and investment has been estimated at up to £48bn a year, or 3.5% of GDP.⁷

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The prospect of the UK’s departure from the European Union makes it even more important for the UK to have the languages needed to forge wider commercial and

3 Roberts, Leite & Wade (2018), ‘Monolingualism is the Illiteracy of the Twenty-First Century’, *Hispania*, 100:5 pp. 116–18.

4 British Council (2017), [Languages for the Future](#).

5 Woll & Wei (2019 forthcoming), *Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning: Broadening our Perspectives*, *British Academy Special Research Project*

6 Mepham & Martinovic (2017), ‘Multilingualism and out-group acceptance: The mediating roles of cognitive flexibility and deprovincialization’, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 37 pp. 51-73

7 Foreman-Peck & Wang (2014), [The Costs to the UK Language Deficiencies as a Barrier to UK Engagement in Exporting: a Report to UK Trade and Investment](#).

other links.⁸ Both in education and in the workplace the UK has depended heavily on the skills of non-UK EU nationals. They continue to play a vital role, but this is an opportunity to refocus attention on the language-skills of UK citizens.



The current state

The UK is currently nowhere near to fulfilling its linguistic potential. The global nature of English does not make up for that underperformance, which is worsening each year. There has been a drastic and continuing decline in the numbers studying languages at secondary school and consequently at university, especially over the past two decades.⁹ There is no indication that the Government's aim for 90% of pupils in England to take a language (modern or ancient) at GCSE by 2025 will come even close to being achieved: it remains stubbornly below 50% (down from 76% in 2002). This has produced a vicious circle in which fewer teachers are trained, with the result that provision and uptake at school are further damaged.

The decline in take-up has had a disproportionately large effect on socio-economically and regionally disadvantaged groups (for example creating a North/South divide in language-learning within England; in Wales, fewer than 20% took a language other than English or Welsh at GCSE in 2017).¹⁰ Although the decline has affected the whole secondary sector (state and independent), it has affected the state sector most, and disadvantaged groups within the state sector most of all.¹¹ The Government recently recognized the problem that this growing gulf in language-learning opportunities creates for social mobility.¹²

8 See *Languages after Brexit* (note 2).

9 British Council (2018), *Language Trends 2018: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England survey report*; British Academy (2018), *The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture*; Tinsley & Board (2015), *Why aren't England's A-level students learning languages?*. Total undergraduate enrolments in modern language degrees in England fell by 52.7% between 2003-4 and 2014-15: Wyburd (2017) in *Languages after Brexit* (see note 2), p.174.

10 StatsWales, *GCSE entries and results (pupils in Year 11/pupils aged 15) by subject group*.

11 British Council (2017), *Language Trends 2016/17: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England survey report*; British Council (2018), *Language Trends 2018: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England survey report*; Tinsley (2017) in *Languages after Brexit* (see note 2); Graham, (2017) *Poorer children are being left behind when it comes to learning languages*.

12 Department for Education (2017), *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education*.

There is a disconnect between mainstream education and community-based language-learning. The language-learning that goes on in thousands of complementary (or supplementary) schools in the UK has little public visibility.¹³ It is scarcely ever connected up with the learning done by the same children in mainstream schools. Although their extra linguistic competence has the potential to be an educational asset,¹⁴ some of these children even actively conceal it, feeling that it is irrelevant or embarrassing.¹⁵ This is bad for social cohesion: it weakens any positive connection and psychological integration between the children's community or home life and their school life.¹⁶

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- 13 It has been estimated that there are between 3,000 and 5,000 supplementary schools in the UK, many of which offer classes in languages other than English ([National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education](#)); Borthwick (2017) in *Languages after Brexit* (see note 2).
- 14 British Council (2018), [Language for Resilience. The role of language in enhancing the resilience of Syrian refugees and host communities](#); Sneddon, Magda & Albana (2008), 'Learning to Read with Dual Language Books', *Language and Education*, 22:2 pp. 137-154. See also [NALDIC, the national subject association for English as an additional language](#).
- 15 Mehmedbegović (2011), [Bright bilingual migrant children 'placed in low ability classes'](#).
- 16 British Academy (2018), [Response to the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper](#); AHRC/MEITS (2018), [Policy Briefing on Community Languages and Social Cohesion](#); Routes into Languages (2008), [Community Languages in Higher Education](#).

The way forward

Concerted action is needed to change this picture. A UK strategy, cutting across many policy areas (beyond just education) is needed, as are education-specific strategies for England and Northern Ireland (alongside the existing ones of the Scottish and Welsh devolved administrations).¹⁷

The good news is that the UK already has untapped reservoirs of linguistic capacity. This could lead to an increase in national capacity through improved provision and uptake of language-learning in education and in workplace training, and more active recognition of existing competence in languages other than English among UK citizens, including those for whom English is not a first language, and more support for development of these existing skills.

Attitudinal change is needed which shifts away from a model that sees a few people as good at languages and most people as bad, towards a model of a spectrum of linguistic competence.¹⁸ The opportunity to learn languages needs to be open to all, at all life stages. Learners should be able to progress along the spectrum, through provision in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, complementary and supplementary schools, workplace training (including apprenticeships), and lifelong learning, whether central to their main programme of study/training or supplementary to it.

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This widening of capacity and opportunity will require a systematic policy approach across all sectors of education to enable continuity, overcoming the problems of transition between education stages, and building bridges between mainstream and complementary education.¹⁹ National linguistic capacity needs to be developed in a planned way, by clustering resources where possible and by providing protection from market forces where it is in the national interest.²⁰

The task of making the UK's language capacity fit for purpose cannot be solved simply by changes to education policy. A joined-up approach is needed, across social, economic, and international policy, with coordination across different government departments and liaison with the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.²¹

17 Scottish Government (2012), [Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach](#); Welsh Government (2017), [Global Futures, a plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales](#). The Scottish policy integrates community languages into the wider teaching of languages, as does the national strategy recently developed in Ireland (see [Foreign Languages Strategy](#)). For England, some of the challenges faced by secondary schools are outlined in Teaching Schools Council (2016), [Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review](#).

18 The spectrum runs from Level A1 to C2 in the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

19 For example, the Hampshire County Council Young Interpreter Scheme and the Home Language Accreditation Project (closed 2017).

For systemic public policy proposals, see Matras (2017), 'Can global cities have a language policy?', *Languages, Society & Policy*.

20 For secondary education in England, a modest start is being made with the launch of a [Centre of Excellence for Modern Languages and regional hubs](#).

21 Ayres-Bennett (2017) in *Languages after Brexit* (see note 2).

What we could achieve

The potential benefits of a successful, coordinated, strategy for languages in the UK are significant and wide-ranging. Such a strategy will help to:

- 1. Create a global Britain** that forges stronger trade and business links among the three quarters of the world’s population that does not speak English, as well as with those in the remaining quarter who combine English with other languages.²² Language skills create openings and ease transactions.
- 2. Create the mindset of cultural agility which, according to employers, enhances employability**—the intercultural communicative competence that enables people, even if they are not professional linguists, to navigate their way through multicultural environments, to be flexible, adaptable, globally mobile, and sensitive to cultural differences.²³
- 3. Strengthen our capacity for research and innovation**—in science, technology, engineering, culture, the arts, humanities, social sciences, and many industries—enabling researchers from all disciplines to be mobile, to collaborate and work around the world, to widen their conceptual framework, and to reach into specialist literature written in other languages.²⁴
- 4. Raise attainment standards across the school curriculum:** research has shown that languages are key facilitating subjects: they help with literacy and with other areas of the curriculum.²⁵ Language skills improve children’s access to other subjects within school as well as to the world of work. Levels of literacy are a major predictor of children’s attainment in science and maths.²⁶ Having the ability to switch between languages develops cognitive flexibility, reflected in stronger skills in multitasking and creativity.²⁷
- 5. Enhance skills and productivity** in many sectors which face a language skills crisis, including the tourism and hospitality sector, where employees with language skills and/or with a mindset of cultural agility provide a better service;²⁸ in the creative industries such people are more open, confident, and adventurous in collaborating across cultures on a creative project; and so on.²⁹
- 6. Further strengthen our diplomacy and soft power, our defence and security,³⁰ and our work in international development.³¹**

22 British Academy (2013), [Languages: The State of the Nation](#); British Academy (2016), [Born Global: A British Academy Project on Languages and Employability](#); British Council (2013), [The English Effect: the impact of English, what it’s worth to the UK and why it matters to the world](#); Education First (2018) [English Proficiency Index](#).

23 CBI-Pearson (2016), [Education and Skills Survey, The Right Combination](#); British Academy (2018), [The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

24 British Academy (2009), [Language Matters](#); Forsdick (2017) in *Languages after Brexit* (see note 2).

25 Stewart (2005), ‘Foreign language study in elementary schools: benefits and implications for achievement in reading and math’, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 33 (1) pp.11-16.

26 EEF and Royal Society (2017), [Review of SES and Science Learning in Formal Educational Settings](#).

27 Prior & MacWhinney (2010), ‘A bilingual advantage in task switching’, *Bilingualism: Language and cognition*, 13 (02) pp. 253-262; Adesope et al (2010), ‘A systematic review and meta-analysis of the cognitive correlates of bilingualism’, *Review of Educational Research*, 80 (2) pp. 207-245.

28 UKInbound (2018), [Breaking the Language Barrier: Equipping our Tourism Workforce for the UK’s Future](#).

29 New Statesman (November 2017), [Language skills are in decline at national cost](#).

30 British Academy (2013), [Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security](#).

31 Footitt, Wine & Tessur (2018), [Respecting communities in International Development: languages and cultural understanding](#).

7. **Improve social mobility** by giving all children, not just affluent ones, the language skills that foster literacy, educational attainment, and a confident mindset that views cultural difference with curiosity rather than prejudice.³²
8. **Build social cohesion:** English is the bedrock of civic participation. But valuing and recognizing the learning of ‘community’, ‘heritage’, or ‘home’ languages that goes on in many households and complementary (or supplementary) schools would strengthen social integration as well as national linguistic capacity (including in security and diplomacy).³³
9. **Improve the quality and accessibility of public service interpreting and translation** (for legal, policing, health, and other services) ensuring that public services can fulfil their obligations.³⁴ The UK has a reservoir of potential to produce, through training of existing native speakers, more interpreters and translators in relevant languages. Improved status of, and more widespread proficiency in, British Sign Language would also help to improve equality of access.³⁵
10. **Enhance our well-being:** acquiring even basic competence in an additional language, whether modern or ancient, opens up a lifelong extra dimension to us as individuals through our understanding of other cultures, our opportunities, our travel, our contacts, and our capacity to engage with those who are different from us, both within the UK and in the increasingly interconnected world beyond. At an advanced level (that of language-based research into cultures), such understanding goes beyond personal or national benefit and increases to the sum total of human knowledge, both about the modern world, and our past.
11. **Improve health and reduce health expenditure:** research is beginning to suggest that the onset of dementia occurs earlier in monolinguals than in bilinguals, and that monolinguals recover more slowly from strokes.³⁶ Even basic language learning has cognitive benefits: by training the brain to suppress one language while speaking another, we build up healthy ‘cognitive reserve’.³⁷ The same cognitive flexibility, derived from language-learning, that improves our performance in the workplace also boosts our health.

The four UK-wide National Academies recognise the need for action to improve the linguistic capacity of the UK. We welcome the plans by a coalition of organisations to explore in detail the practical steps needed to address the challenges identified. We ask Government to engage with this process and consider how it could adopt and implement a national strategy for languages.

32 Department for Education (2017), Policy Paper: *Improving social mobility through education. The government's national plan to support children and young people to reach their full potential*, pp.18 and 21.

33 British Academy (2013), *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security*, pp.10, 13, 45–6, 75; Edwards, ‘Multilingual Individuals’, in Singleton & Aronin (ed.) (2018), *Twelve Lectures on Multilingualism* (Multilingual Matters) pp. 135-161; University of Glasgow UNESCO Chair Programme (2018), *Refugee integration through languages and the arts*; MEITS (2016-2018), *Strand 3: Sociolinguistic perspectives on multilingualism: identity, diversity and social cohesion*.

34 Carlisle (2017) in *Languages after Brexit* (see note 2); National Register of Public Service Interpreters; NHS England (2014), *Primary Care Medical Services Interpretation and Translation Framework*.

35 See the *British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (2015)*.

36 Alladi et al (2013), ‘Bilingualism delays age at onset of dementia, independent of education and immigration status’, *Neurology* 81 (22) pp.1938-1944; Alladi et al (2015), ‘The impact of bilingualism on cognitive outcome after stroke’, *Stroke* 47 pp.258-261; Bialystok et al (2009), ‘Bilingual minds’, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 10 pp. 89–129; Bialystok et al (2014), ‘Effects of bilingualism and aging on executive function and working memory’, *Psychol Aging* 29 (3) pp. 696-705.

37 Bak & Mehmedbegovic (2017), ‘Healthy linguistic diet: The value of linguistic diversity and language learning across the lifespan’, *Languages, Society & Policy* 1 pp. 1-9; Bak (2016), ‘Language lessons to help protect against dementia’, *BMJ* vol 354 pp. i5039.

About the Academy

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The British Academy
10-11 Carlton House Terrace,
London SW1Y 5AH

thebritishacademy.ac.uk
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