



2015

# LIVING LANGUAGES

A special report on language learning

# HOW LANGUAGES TOUCH LIVES

## Highlights from the Case for Language Learning

English has, to date, effectively captured the public imagination. The Case for Language Learning rose to the challenge, providing a rich source of discussion, expertise and personal stories which demonstrate the value of learning languages.

This Living Languages report highlights many of the enlightening debates and thinking generated by the project, and brings together some of the dominant themes. It re-examines the role that the education system plays in the downturn in language learning in schools and universities.

**The project provided a rich source of discussion, expertise and personal stories**

It highlights new research into young people's attitudes to language learning. And it examines the influence of language

learning on many current social and political challenges - immigration, multiculturalism and national security.

The report explores the scientific aspects of language, including the findings of some neuroscientists, and features a debate on the implications of taking cognition-enhancing drugs to help master a language. It also tells some powerful personal stories from people who have found that, like travel, foreign languages can transform lives. In essence, drawing on the Case for Language Learning, the report highlights the many rich and varied ways people are "living languages".

**In response to the longstanding** decline in foreign language learning in the UK, the Guardian and the **British Academy** launched the **Case for Language Learning**. During a two-year creative partnership, this fresh and innovative project generated hundreds of articles, discussions, public debates and online Q&A sessions to demonstrate the importance of language learning.

Brought together on a **dedicated website**, many of these articles and events inspired insightful comments from readers, keen to demonstrate their interest and passion for language learning and the issues informing it. For many of these people, foreign languages are an important part of their lives, influencing work, shaping their communities and their personal politics, and providing a source of knowledge and pleasure.

Unlike the drive to promote an appreciation and understanding of science, or the many engaging TV documentaries produced in response to a popular interest in history, no similar campaign about the benefits of speaking a language other than

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CHAPTER 1

LANGUAGE EDUCATION

What's wrong with it and how can it be improved?

**“Like learning in a padded cell,”** is how Stephen Parker, chair of the panel for modern and ancient languages on the A-level Content Advisory Board, **described the way students are expected to learn foreign languages in England.** It's a powerful criticism, all the more significant because Parker, **Henry Simon Professor of German** at Manchester University, **influenced advice from universities to ministers** on how foreign language A-levels should look. Parker's point is that, while changes to the A-level modern languages curriculum over the past 10 years aimed to make it more relevant, recycling topics about family life could be uninspiring. Students were no longer required to read a book in a foreign language, he argued, and the emphasis was often on rote learning rather than on engaging with a different society and culture.

So have well-intentioned efforts to make language learning accessible to as many students as possible misfired? Through the Case for Language Learning, readers and experts expressed a diversity of views on what is

wrong with language education in our schools and universities. Although it would be wrong to say there was a consensus, a theme emerged regarding the importance of recognising that teaching and learning a language must be more than providing and picking up tools to do a technical job.

In her article, Professor Katrin Kohl of the Faculty of Modern **Languages** at the University of Oxford captured it well: “Learning a language is not only tough but may be dull unless it involves intellectual challenges, cultural attractions and communicative rewards. While children in other European countries are motivated from an early age to gain linguistic access to cool Anglophone culture, modern foreign language syllabuses in the UK have been stripped steadily of intellectual interest and cultural appeal.”

**A reader's comment echoed that:** “To all of us whose native language isn't English but who have learned not just English but other foreign languages, it's almost an insult how little interest many English-speaking countries show in the languages and cultures of others. Language learning is not just about learning to communicate in a certain language. It's about so much more than that ... It's about learning about the history, society, culture and customs of the

It's almost an insult how little interest English-speakers show in other cultures

Language learning can be dull unless it also includes history and customs of the target country



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

CHAPTER 1  
**LANGUAGE  
 EDUCATION**  
**What's wrong with it and  
 how can it be improved?**



target country/countries. It's about learning to understand one another on different levels."

The question follows as to how to teach the richness of foreign languages so they are understood as more than a communication tool. Many enthusiastic teachers and learners used the Case for Language Learning to share their ideas.

As in many areas of learning, technology might be one key to engaging the interest and commitment of the YouTube/Facebook/iPad generation in schools. There are plenty of apps aimed to help learners and, as consultant and former language teacher **Joe Dale wrote**, teachers are using social media too: "The **MFLtwitterati** - a grassroots community of UK-based modern foreign language teachers on Twitter - has proved to be an invaluable test-bed for ideas on using new technologies. Over time, the group has developed a strong ethos of sharing innovative classroom practice, encouraging each other to experiment and feed back their findings for further discussion and reflection ..."

Language learning and technology are a good match, according to Joe

Dale, because video conferencing and blogging, for example, are fundamentally about real communication and so is learning a language. "The stumbling block for many is not having the time to seek out new tools and become familiar with them, as well as the fear of relinquishing control to their pupils who may be more techno-savvy than they are."

Just as social media uncover and spread ideas for improving language teaching from the education front line of teachers and learners, a series of British Academy awards also identified fresh, grassroots approaches. **Staff at Dallam school in Cumbria** had been struggling to get both students and parents in the primarily rural and monocultural area to grasp the importance of language learning. They won an award for rolling out a programme that saw the formation of bilingual tutor groups which would immerse the children in Spanish or French for short bursts of time, two or three times each day. Headteacher Steve Holdup said: "Students coming out of tutor lessons or at break could be heard chatting unselfconsciously in French or Spanish."

Unlike some other academic subjects, language learning does not necessarily end, or even begin, during years of school or higher

education; any ambition to improve language learning in the UK should take account of that. An experts' **top 10 list** of practical tips for learning a language was compiled and could be used by students wherever and whenever they are learning. They include setting manageable goals, learning vocabulary for words drawn from personal events and experiences, and, if possible, visiting the country where the language is spoken.

But underlying even the most encouraging and handy advice, one clear message emerged that no one denies: learning a foreign language is hard. As one reader put it: "Learning a language is not like climbing a mountain, where there is a simple goal and you know when you've achieved it. It's more like doing a jigsaw that reveals a map that helps you explore a country or culture, and even a partial map helps. Learning a language means learning pronunciation, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, idioms and sentence patterns, as well as the cultural differences that also affect communication. Speaking, listening, reading, writing, translation are different, complementary skills, and how important each is depends on your motives and interests ... Follow your interests - reading, sport, cooking; it makes it easier to push yourself."

Students could be heard chatting unselfconsciously in French or Spanish

Technology is one way of engaging the iPad generation - and there are now plenty of apps to help learners



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY; ALAMY

CHAPTER 2

VOICES OF YOUTH

Young people's attitudes to language learning

**Last year, universities in the UK accepted the lowest number of foreign language undergraduates** in a decade, perpetuating a worrying cycle. Fewer graduates in foreign languages limits the supply of people likely to go into language teaching, and fewer language teachers means fewer pupils becoming enthusiastic linguists, inspired to study a language at university. To help break this vicious circle, it is important to know young people's attitudes to teaching and learning foreign languages, though many of those views are not encouraging.

Youth Voices, **fresh research** conducted for the Guardian and British Academy by the polling organisation ICM, delivered some sobering results. It found that young people are put off learning a language: they accept it can be good for an international career, speaking with other people and understanding their culture, but they're turned off because it feels too difficult. Many regard grammar as hard and remembering vocabulary a chore. They complain what they learn in school isn't useful in the real world, and they don't feel confident

speaking a foreign language out loud. Other subjects are more interesting - maths and English, for example, are seen by schools to be more important and, anyway, most people speak English, don't they?

For the research, ICM questioned 1,001 people between the ages 14 and 24 from across the UK about their attitudes to language learning. A reasonable proportion did see learning a language as a good practical skill and an incentive to travel. Almost a fifth already speak another language at home with

A good grasp of grammar and confidence are vital when using languages abroad

their family and a good majority (70%) said they would be interested in learning another language in the future. Not many, though, thought it would lead to better job prospects in the UK or a higher salary in their careers.

Particularly worrying is **young people's own judgment of their competence** in a foreign language they were supposed to be learning. Those who had studied languages at school were

Many language students felt they had mastered only basic phrases

asked to assess their own ability, and many felt they had mastered only basic phrases. Almost half of those questioned who had studied Mandarin at school said they would have difficulty understanding anything at all.

Young people do have ideas to encourage the takeup of languages in school, according to the research. **Popular ones** included foreign exchanges, opportunities to talk with native



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

**FINDINGS OF THE YOUTH VOICES SURVEY**

The Youth Voices research prompted some readers to blame teaching methods for the UK's record on languages, and several had experiences which chimed with the findings of the survey:

"The failure and dropout rate in languages is a national scandal, and people will blame everything except their own teaching methods."

"My eldest son did GCSE French and got a good grade - B, I think - but when on holiday in France, he would never try out his French on the locals. He could tell me what I needed to say but would not have a go himself. This year we took our granddaughters to Spain. We gave our eldest (nearly six years old) a childrens' Spanish phrase book about four weeks before we went. While there, she was happy to try and engage locals in conversation using her book. Most of it is about confidence."

"My grandson, who is taking French and German, and Latin in extra classes at another school, complains that his GCSE syllabus would be of little use in the countries where the languages are spoken. He wants grammar, so he can compose his own sentences instead of having to learn set phrases by rote."

CHAPTER 2

VOICES OF YOUTH

Young people's attitudes to language learning

For years, the study of modern foreign languages has been in decline in our classrooms and university lecture theatres, and even recent improvements in entries for GCSEs have been shrugged off by some experts. As the [Association for](#)

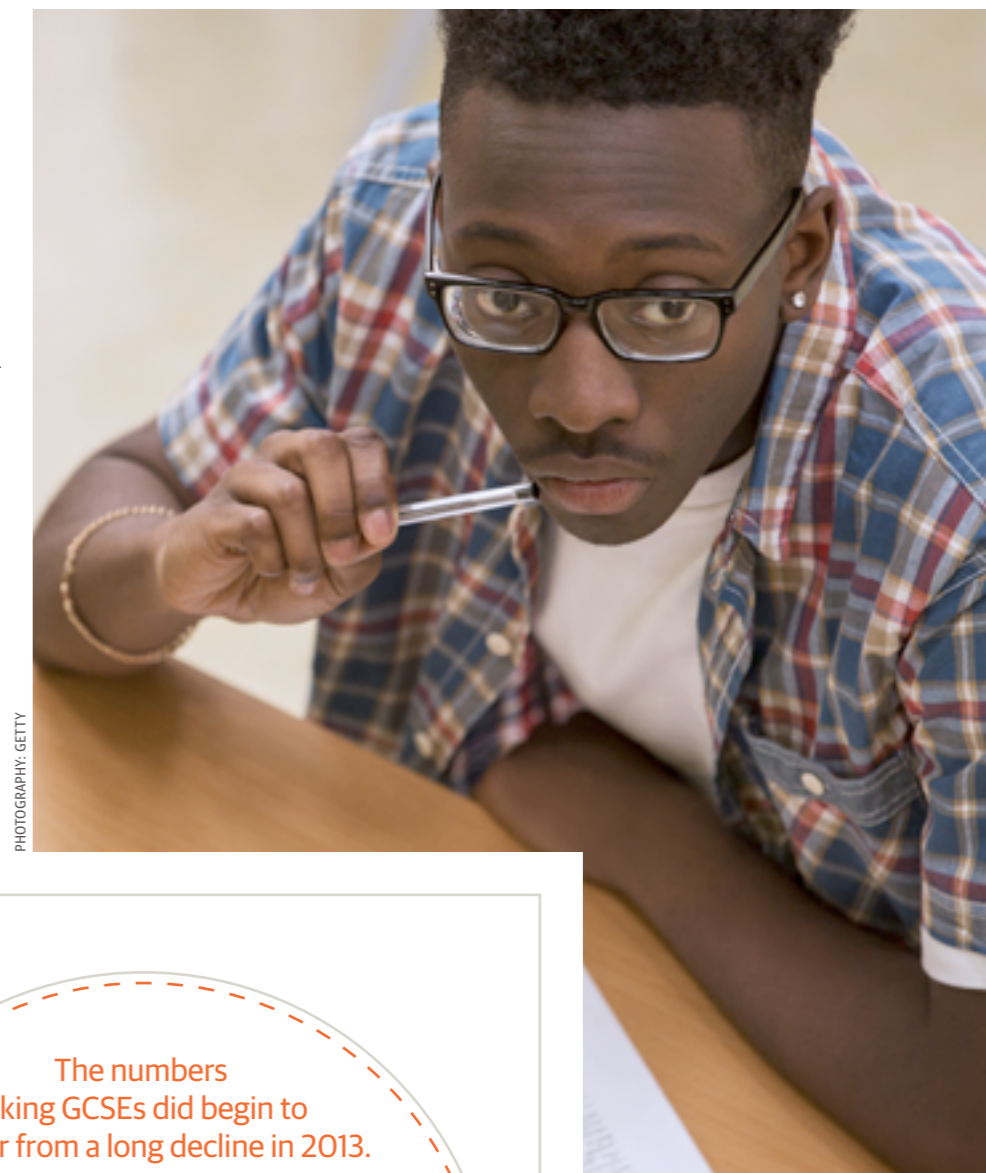
[Language Learning](#) highlights,

French, the largest entry, has not come back into the top 10 list of GCSE subjects, where it once was.

There is another reason why some are holding back on the celebrations. The sudden upturn in interest in modern language GCSEs is likely to have been caused by the

introduction in 2010 of the English baccalaureate, a measurement of schools' top grade performance in "traditional academic" subjects: English, maths, science, a language, and history or geography.

What we may be seeing is not necessarily a sustainable rise in the popularity of languages in secondary schools, but rather a reaction to the government's incentive to schools to climb the league tables by encouraging pupils to sit language GCSEs. Whether that will stimulate a long-lasting improvement in A-level and degree-level entries and mean England's education system produces more competent, confident foreign language speakers remains to be seen.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

For years, the study of modern foreign languages has been in decline

speakers, more help with grammar, more interesting topics, interactive lessons and the use of language apps. However, while the findings suggest young people's attitudes to languages are not wholly negative, the statistics on the subject choices young people make in schools and universities offer little comfort.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NUMBERS

The **number of undergraduates accepted** for a degree in a modern language fell to its **lowest** in a decade in 2012-13: a fall of **22%** since 2010-2011

Students studying **A-level foreign languages** in England has been in **steady decline** for 10 years. In one decade, numbers sitting **French A-level** almost halved.



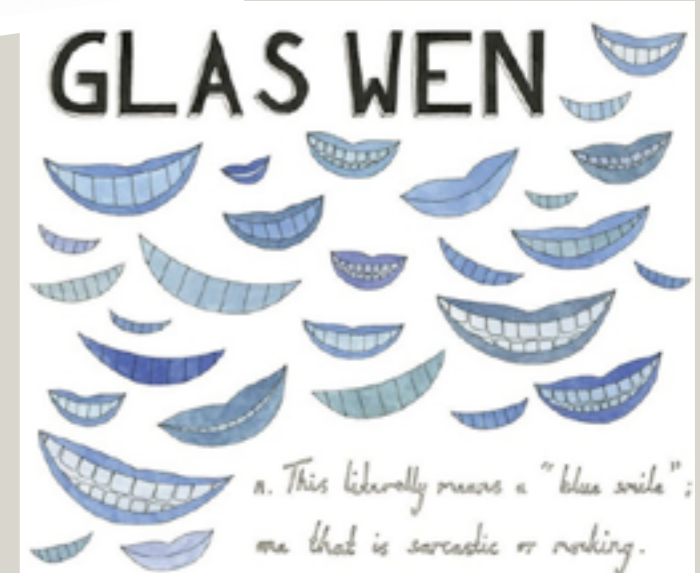
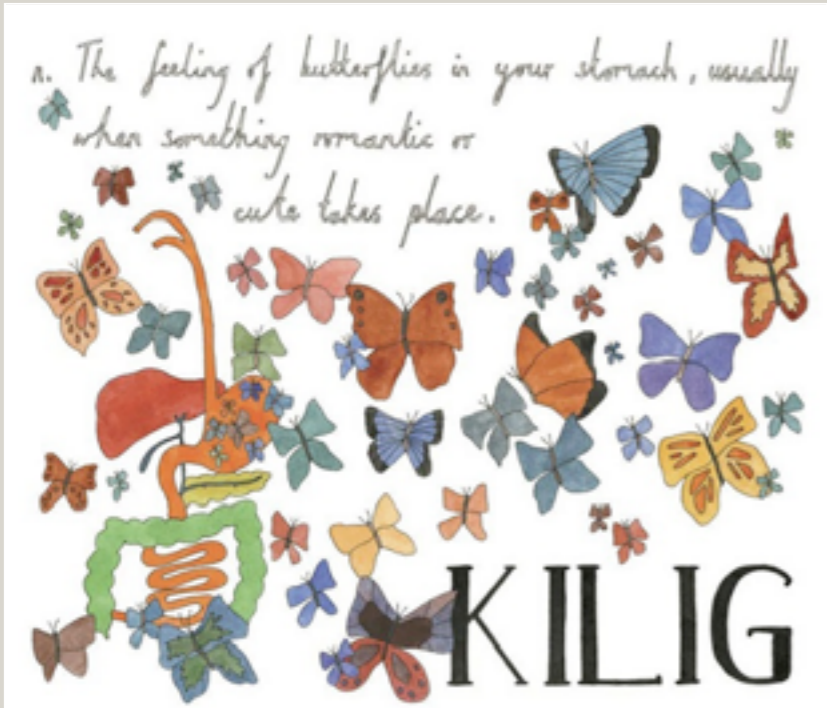
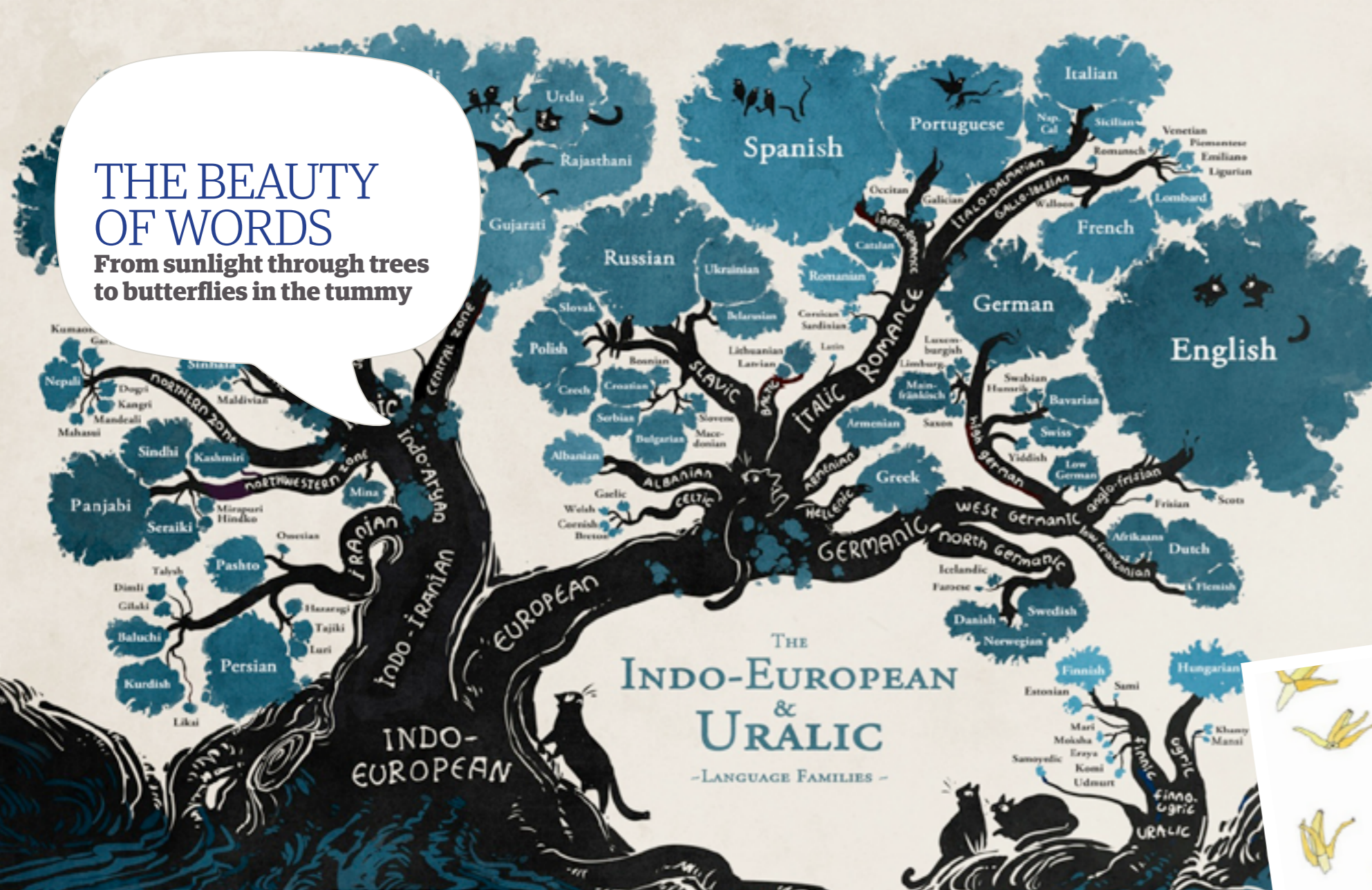
The numbers taking GCSEs did begin to recover from a long decline in 2013. Overall, GCSE entries for modern languages rose by **17%**. Spanish entries rose by **26%** and French by **16%**

To improve language teaching, young people wanted more opportunities to talk with native speakers and go on foreign exchanges



# THE BEAUTY OF WORDS

From sunlight through trees to butterflies in the tummy



CHAPTER 3

# THE LANGUAGE DEBATES

From performance enhancing-drugs to national security

In a series of live and online public debates, the Case for Language Learning demonstrates that understanding the real value of foreign languages is not just about getting the education curriculum right, but leads into other essential areas of UK society. **Economics, science and national security** are strong examples. In the world of economics, the notion that “everyone speaks English, so why would I need to speak anything else?” is firmly challenged by academic research and the experience of some business people. In science, there are developments in the understanding of the human brain that may lead to a “foreign language performance-enhancing” drug; and, in turn, there is good evidence that learning a language itself is a kind of drug or therapy for certain conditions. A nation’s capacity for understanding foreign languages is powerfully presented as a matter of national security and an essential part of foreign diplomacy.

Poor language skills act like a “**tax on growth**”, according to **James Foreman-Peck**, professor of economics at Cardiff Business

School. He believes they hamper small- to medium-size exporters, who are unable to employ the language specialists brought in by global companies; and they also deter non-exporters from trading internationally.

Nick Brown is chief executive of Nikwax. His company is a UK-based manufacturer of cleaning and waterproofing products, exporting to 50 countries and producing print materials in 48 languages. Brown’s own experience supports Forman-Peck’s academic view:

**“English is fine if you want to buy things, but it’s not the right language to use for**

**Poor language skills hamper SMEs who can’t afford specialist linguists**



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

**people who want to sell things.”**

In a roundtable discussion, **“Lack of Languages Stifle Brits and Americans”**, Nigel Vincent, vice-president for research and higher education policy at British Academy, warned: “By sitting on our linguistic laurels, we disadvantage the United Kingdom - and it’s exactly the same argument in the US.” Young people from other countries now offer fluency in English, plus their native language. “They are ahead of the game.” However, making the case for foreign languages as a driver of success in a global market is not straightforward, and the evidence points in different directions. **Born Global**, a British Academy report on languages in the labour market, says many employers do see languages as beneficial, but they don’t necessarily prioritise them at the recruitment stage. There’s evidence that the demand for language skills is, in certain areas, trumped by a greater demand for other attributes. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), for example, finds some employers can’t fill jobs because of a lack of language skills, but it’s technical, job-specific skills they’re crying out for the most.

During the Case for Language Learning **live Q&A on how linguists can use their skill to get a job, a student** presented the panel of experts with the strong

## POOR LANGUAGE SKILLS THE COST TO UK BUSINESS

62%

of companies aspiring to export regard languages as a barrier

British Chambers of Commerce, 2013

Deficient language skills costs the UK economy 3.5% of GDP per year - that’s

£48 billion

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013

70% of businesses value foreign language skills among their employees

Confederation of British Industry, 2013

Progress in understanding the brain may lead to a “foreign language performance-enhancing” drug;



CHAPTER 3

THE LANGUAGE DEBATES

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impression that language skills were not highly valued. "I'm currently a student in modern languages, due to graduate in 2016. Throughout my school life and during university, I was under the belief that companies in the UK were in dire need of language graduates due to the lack of skills among the British population. Now that I've started to look into jobs, I know I don't want to be a translator or a teacher, and I feel somewhat lost. I feel that companies don't value languages as

Many job applicants are finding foreign languages are an increasingly necessary extra for employers



PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM FRIEDRICH, THE GUARDIAN; GETTY

much as they say so in public. What are your thoughts on the career prospects of language graduates in the UK at the moment?"

**Jack Porteous, language and culture adviser at UK Trade and Investment, confirmed the view** that foreign languages are desirable but won't necessarily be your ace card: "I would say that languages are an increasingly necessary 'extra' to have to make sure you get that job. I work with hundreds of businesses each year, and when they are looking to hire they'd usually prefer somebody with language skills - and would nearly always use it as a deciding factor between two otherwise equal candidates. It is rarely the main requirement, however, so making sure you can prove your other skills and characteristics is vitally important."

**Adam Marshall, executive director of policy and external affairs at the British Chambers of Commerce,** advised applicants to make language skills part of your wider pitch: "The career prospects are excellent if you figure out how to sell yourself to businesses. Think about what they need first. They need a certain mix of skills, not just to tick a box called 'languages'. Figure out how your language skills fit as part of what you have to offer more generally, as it's the combination of abilities you've got that helps you to stand out to the businesses I work with!"



FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS IN THE JOBS MARKET HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE EXPERTS' VIEWS

**DASHA AMROM**  
Managing director, Career Coaching Ventures"  
I would suggest that a good degree supplemented by a foreign language is probably more valuable in certain fields rather than purely a language degree. But again, we can't generalise as a lot depends on a particular industry and a particular job in question. For instance, in investment banking, a business/economics/maths/science degree with a foreign language looks amazing on the CV and bankers love to interview people of this calibre."

Having more language graduates will not improve our skills gap

**HUMAIR NAQVI**  
Enterprise and education regional director, Rosetta Stone  
"Do we need linguists or graduates that have language skills as additional capabilities? Our research shows it's the latter and hence, having more language graduates will not improve our skills gap."

**JACK PORTEOUS,**  
Language and culture adviser, UK Trade and Investment  
"Employers do value candidates who have spent time living and working abroad - you just have to show that you're aware of the soft skills it has taught you. This could include cross-cultural awareness, communication skills, maturity and resilience from time spent abroad, and even logical problem-solving. It's just important to remember to link your experiences to skills which make you employable."

CHAPTER 4

PERFORMANCE-RAISING DRUGS

The implications of improving our cognitive faculties



**“Can drugs deliver peak learning performance?”** This was the question posed to a public audience at a Case for Language Learning **discussion on drugs**. About two-thirds of the audience raised their hands to signal that if there were a safe cognitive-enhancing drug to help make learning a language more interesting and fun, they’d take it. The use of performance-enhancing drugs in competitive sport is considered to be wrong. It’s an artificial manipulation of natural ability we judge to be unfair, and we condemn it.

What, then, are the rights and wrongs of drugs that improve our cognitive abilities to think, solve problems, learn or stay alert? If there were a pill to improve the capacity to master a new language, who should get it? Educational underachievers who might need it? Those who could afford it? In competitive exams, would drug-enhanced achievement count for the same as the performance of someone lucky enough to have been born with a flair for languages?

The psychologists and neuroscientists haven’t got there

What are the rights and wrongs of drugs that improve our cognitive abilities?

so far, but **there are researchers** who claim there is evidence that learning a foreign language could itself be a kind of treatment for other conditions. For example, **some studies suggest learning a foreign language has general benefits for your cognitive capacity**, and can give some protection from some of the undesirable effects of ageing, including dementia.

As Alison Mackey, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and Lancaster University, **writes**, neuroscience is telling us more about the benefits of being multilingual: “We know that people who speak more than one language

fluently have better memories and are more cognitively creative and mentally flexible than monolinguals.”

Mackey believes that understanding more

about what happens in our brains when we hear, understand and produce second languages has plenty of potential: “Brain-imaging research may eventually help us tailor language-learning methods to our cognitive abilities, telling us whether we learn best from formal instruction that highlights rules, immersing ourselves in the sounds of a language, or perhaps one followed by the other.”

The discussion showed that the promises and possibilities of scientific research are immense and exciting,

CHAPTER 5

DEFEATING  
TERRORISM

The role of language in the UK's defence

**The importance of foreign languages** in the fight against terrorism was undisputed in an **online discussion about national security and diplomacy**. "9/11 finally settled the argument about the importance of language for national security and wellbeing in government agencies in the US," said Richard Brecht, **formerly of the Center for Advanced Study of Language**, University of Maryland. But, he added, even though the danger is understood, progress towards change and improvements in the US is slow: "After significant investments in language programming in defence, intelligence and diplomacy over the past decade, Government Accounting Office studies indicate that we still are a way away from having all language positions staffed at appropriate levels."

The potential vulnerability of nations weak in foreign language skills was scrutinised, opening small windows on to the intriguing world of



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

counterterrorism and intelligence. In response to a question regarding the threat to UK security if we don't invest in languages, Charles Crawford, a former British diplomat, gave this insight: "Let's say we have suspicions about would-be terrorists operating out of North Africa, using relatives in the UK. The language reading and listening skills required to keep an eye on what they are doing may be frighteningly high, probably

needing native Arab and/or Somali speakers who can tune into the variations of slang and code words they'll be using to cover their tracks. Probably only native speakers ready to do this sort of work for Her Majesty's Government can do it.

"We might need Special Intelligence Service officers out on the ground in the suspect countries

**We need intelligence officers abroad asking questions on the ground**

concerned, asking questions and making contacts with local police forces, and diplomats winning over local senior policymakers and media contacts so that they help us in this dirty work. So a really wide range of language skills are needed in many areas of national security, not all of them at all obvious, to head off those who want to blow us up or otherwise damage us."

To keep the UK's streets safe, foreign language speakers are critical



CHAPTER 6

DRIVER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Immigration, language and communities

**Foreign languages are both** a driver of, and subject to, significant social change. The potential for foreign languages to both bind and divide communities was one of the themes of the Case for Language Learning. Some discussions highlighted how the prevalence of a multitude of foreign languages spoken in a community can be alienating and fuel hostility to immigration. Others argued that multilingual neighbourhoods are an opportunity to learn

There are about 300 languages spoken in the UK, but bilingualism is often still undervalued

**Many ethnic minority groups in the UK speak two or more languages**

other languages, deepen empathy between people of different cultures and improve social cohesion. Across the world, globalisation and cultural uniformity mean some minority languages are not shaping societies but have themselves become vulnerable to social change, and are now endangered. Meanwhile, nations, including the UK, struggle to value minority languages in the face of globalised languages and uniform cultures.

**“This government has not done a great deal to encourage an outward-looking attitude among young people,”**

was the view of Sue Mendus, FBA Morrell

professor emerita of political philosophy at the University of York, who, during a roundtable discussion, highlighted that more and better teaching of history, culture and language skills could do much to change attitudes. **But, a comment from a reader on the discussion** shows how foreign languages can be divisive: “I am speaking as [a member of] a non-white minority, born in this country. Speaking 300 languages in the country is not a good thing. It creates division and hostility towards others, as (a) we do not understand what others are saying; (b) you can talk in your own language to hide views from others.”



In another roundtable discussion an exchange between Jocelyn Wyburd, chair of the University Council of Modern Languages, and David Goodhart, chair of the Demos advisory group, underlined different perspectives on the impact of language diversity on a community. Wyburd stated many ethnic minority groups speak two or more languages, and contrasted this with the white British majority’s monolingualism. She argued encouraging English mother-tongue speakers to learn another language would benefit students academically and, crucially, help them to understand

their fellow residents’ cultures: “We’ve got high-achieving students who have English as an additional language, often out-achieving mother-tongue English speakers. One, and only one, of the reasons is the increased cognitive benefits of bilingualism. If we can harness the multilingualism in our presence and have that affect everybody - not just say to immigrants you have to learn English because you’re in this country, but actually we have to learn other languages as well - that could be massively beneficial in schools and benefit cross-cultural communication.”

David Goodhart was dismissive

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY; ALAMY



CHAPTER 6

DRIVER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Immigration, language and communities

in his response: "The idea that you have to learn a foreign language to make yourself understood in your own country will strike most people as quite bizarre. Many would be more inclined to sympathise with Ukip leader Nigel Farage's recent comment that he felt uncomfortable when surrounded by people speaking foreign languages on the bus."

Suzanne Fletcher, chair of Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary, said in a third discussion that, in her experience, migrants were desperate to learn English because this would give them the opportunity for work, income and general improvement. However, John Leech, Liberal Democrat MP for Manchester and Withington, challenged that. He said he knew an elderly woman in his constituency who had come from Poland to the UK in the 1960s and still could not speak a word of English, though he stressed that might not be her decision: "There is a view that some women are discouraged from learning English because it keeps them in the home." He said it was obviously really important



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARTIN ARGLES, THE GUARDIAN; ALAMY

for migrants to learn English but, equally, there were cultural barriers that sometimes had to be broken down first.

There are about 300 languages spoken in the country, often by people from migrant families whose first language isn't English. But the Case for Language Learning found some strong views that this sort of bilingualism is undervalued - sometimes attacked - in a way that impedes social cohesion.

A Guardian/ICM poll did find most young people in Britain, whose native language isn't English, believe that speaking a second

language is an advantage in life. Yet only just over a third take a qualification in their mother tongue. The study, of 1,001 people aged 14-24 across Great Britain, included 279 who spoke a language other than English at home. Of those, just over 60% believed doing so gave them an advantage, compared with just over half of the sample as a whole.

Some interpret this low uptake as evidence that young people feel having English as a second language is regarded as a problem and not much to be proud of.

**Vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, Leszek Borysiewicz**, who speaks Polish and English, said he dislikes the phrase "heritage languages" for those spoken alongside English by migrants to Britain and their descendants: "These are real languages, living languages that give people a huge insight into culture and give the children who can speak them additional opportunities."

Professionals, skilled at helping communities bond and flourish, talk of the huge benefits that flow from respecting a neighbour's language and culture. The point is made vividly in a blog by Emma Brech, who works towards supporting bilingual parents for the charity **Renaissi**:

"As our bilingual parent support

One of the UK's many Polish delis and (bottom left) the Polish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith, London - the 2011 census revealed that over 500,000 people in England and Wales speak Polish

These are real, living languages, that give people a huge insight into culture

CHAPTER 6

DRIVER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Immigration, language and communities

advisers will attest, many migrant parents are interested in attainment and, once engaged, will often contribute significant amounts of time and energy to a school and to their children's learning. What makes the difference, they say, is where migrant parents feel that the school is invested in a dialogue with them - respectful and curious towards cultural and linguistic difference, supportive of challenges faced, willing to allow parents in as valuable members of the community and vital stakeholders in the school's development. This is not easy, short-term work; it requires dedicated, sensitive staff specialised in cross-cultural dialogue, who can work effectively alongside mainstream teachers and mediate when tensions arise.

"Take, for example, the school that worked hard on a parent consultation around halal school meals, in order to offer Muslim children more than simply the vegetarian option. Staff quickly found themselves drawn into a tricky debate about slaughtering

methods, and clarification was needed before the meals could go ahead. Or the Latin American parent who wanted to understand why she should make her son work at school when he would automatically move up at the end of the year anyway; in Ecuador, children remain in a lower class until they pass the exam. Or the teacher who did not understand why some Bengali parents did not want their children to watch a sex education film. The adviser mediated and the teacher agreed to allow the parents to preview and discuss the film first. These are the important conversations

Nations across the globe are failing to sustain minority languages

that sit below a school's equalities policy, paving the way towards community cohesion."

The UK is not the only nation accused of undervaluing languages other than its own. Nations across the globe are failing to sustain minority languages to the extent that, according to Unesco, half the world's 6,000 languages face extinction by the end of the century unless they are protected from powerful threats including the march of globalisation and the spread of cultural uniformity. Endangered languages include 150 from Europe.

Quechua, the Amerindian language, spoken, primarily in the Andes from Colombia to

Chile, dates back 2,000 years, and dominated the communication of the Incas. **According to Professor Rosaleen Howard, chair of Hispanic studies in the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle University,** it is spoken by 8 million people, more than any other indigenous language in the Americas. But the pressure to speak Spanish, the language for social advancement and jobs, means it could die out. Many rural

Andeans will have faced strong discrimination in educational opportunities and employment because of speaking Quechua rather than Spanish, Howard said: "When people move from rural areas to the cities they need Spanish in order to get jobs and education; there is no alternative."

That message is being passed down to children by their parents who won't speak Quechua with them at home, and the irony is, it

Young Quechua girls in Peru - the Quechua language is spoken by 8 million people in the Andes



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY



CHAPTER 6

DRIVER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Immigration, language and communities

is the urban elite who have become the strongest advocates for rescuing the language: "The people who push for language revitalisation tend to be the more educated people who are bilingual. They have acquired Spanish through migration to the cities and getting into higher education," Howard said.

More recently, in Bolivia it has become a legal requirement for civil servants to speak an indigenous language in addition to Spanish if

In Bolivia, civil servants must speak an indigenous language as well as Spanish



The protection of indigenous languages is a matter of human rights

they want to keep their jobs: "There are government-sponsored training courses which are making an impact, without a doubt," Howard said. "Also, teaching of these languages in higher education is on the rise, and their use in TV and media is increasing." For Howard, the protection of indigenous languages is a matter of human rights: "It comes home how unjust it is that people should live in a society where they have been forced to abandon those languages or suppress them in favour of speaking this dominant tongue."

One interested reader asked Howard for more details: "I'd be interested to hear how the requirement to learn an indigenous language has been received in Bolivia, thinking of the hysteria that greets any encouragement to recruit bilingual staff in the UK."

Howard replied: "The requirement met with resistance at first, but from what I observed of civil servants taking classes in Aymara [spoken in the highlands of southern Peru and Bolivia], they were enjoying it. What seems to happen is that people who are hiding the fact that they know the language [due to the stigma attached] come out in the open, encouraged by the state endorsement of it."

THREE ENDANGERED EUROPEAN LANGUAGES



FAROESE

Spoken in the Faroe Isles, an autonomously governed part of Denmark

66,000 speakers, both in the islands and in Denmark

Derived from Old Norse, and shares many similarities

"Hello": *Góðan dag*

KARAIM

Spoken by the Karaim people in Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine

60 people known to speak it

Mainly spoken in the town of Trakai by a small community living there since the 14th century

"Hello": *Kiu jachšy*



PITE SAAMI

Spoken by the Saami people in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia

20 speakers out of a native population of 2,000

Reindeer herders may be the only people who might get away only speaking Pite Saami

"Hello": *Buorist*



[Click here for more information](#)

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY; REX FEATURES; CORBIS

CHAPTER 7

PERSONAL STORIES

How learning a language can transform lives



**While former pop musician**

Prof Brian Cox has introduced new audiences to the wonders of physics and astronomy, and the scholar Mary Beard has resurrected the glories of ancient Rome to people who never thought they could be enthralled by classical history, foreign language learning awaits a similar champion. Powerful personal stories about how learning a language has had an impact on people's lives can be key to promoting its benefits. The Case for Language Learning has been a forum for such stories, ranging from well-known linguists who reveal what first inspired them to learn a language, to a moving account of how it helped ease someone's depression.

**The Case for Language Learning has been a forum for people's stories**

Language learning needs someone with a similar appeal to Prof Brian Cox to promote its pleasures and benefits



PHOTOGRAPHY: LEILI FARZANEH, BBC; JEROD HARRIS, FILM MAGIC

**EDDIE IZZARD,**  
STANDUP COMEDIAN  
In 2014, **Eddie Izzard was chosen as Public Language Champion**, nominated by Guardian readers as a public figure to promote the value of speaking another language. The standup comedian was asked what was the most common response when he tells people about his international tour, Force Majeure, which he has performed in French, German and Spanish, and plans to add Russian and Arabic to his act: "They say nothing. It's as if I've said I've swallowed a car. I feel like I'm doing something off the list. I'm about 65% fluent in French, 30% fluent in German, and about half a per cent fluent in Spanish. If I get stuck with a word or a phrase during a show, I ask the audience: 'How do you say such and such,' and they help out," says Izzard. "I don't find languages easy, but I have a hunger to learn. When you can speak another language you go from being a person in an adult's body, pointing at things like a child, to being able to communicate with people like an adult again ... Plus, no standup has done this before, so there's also the fun, the bloody adventure of it."





CHAPTER 7

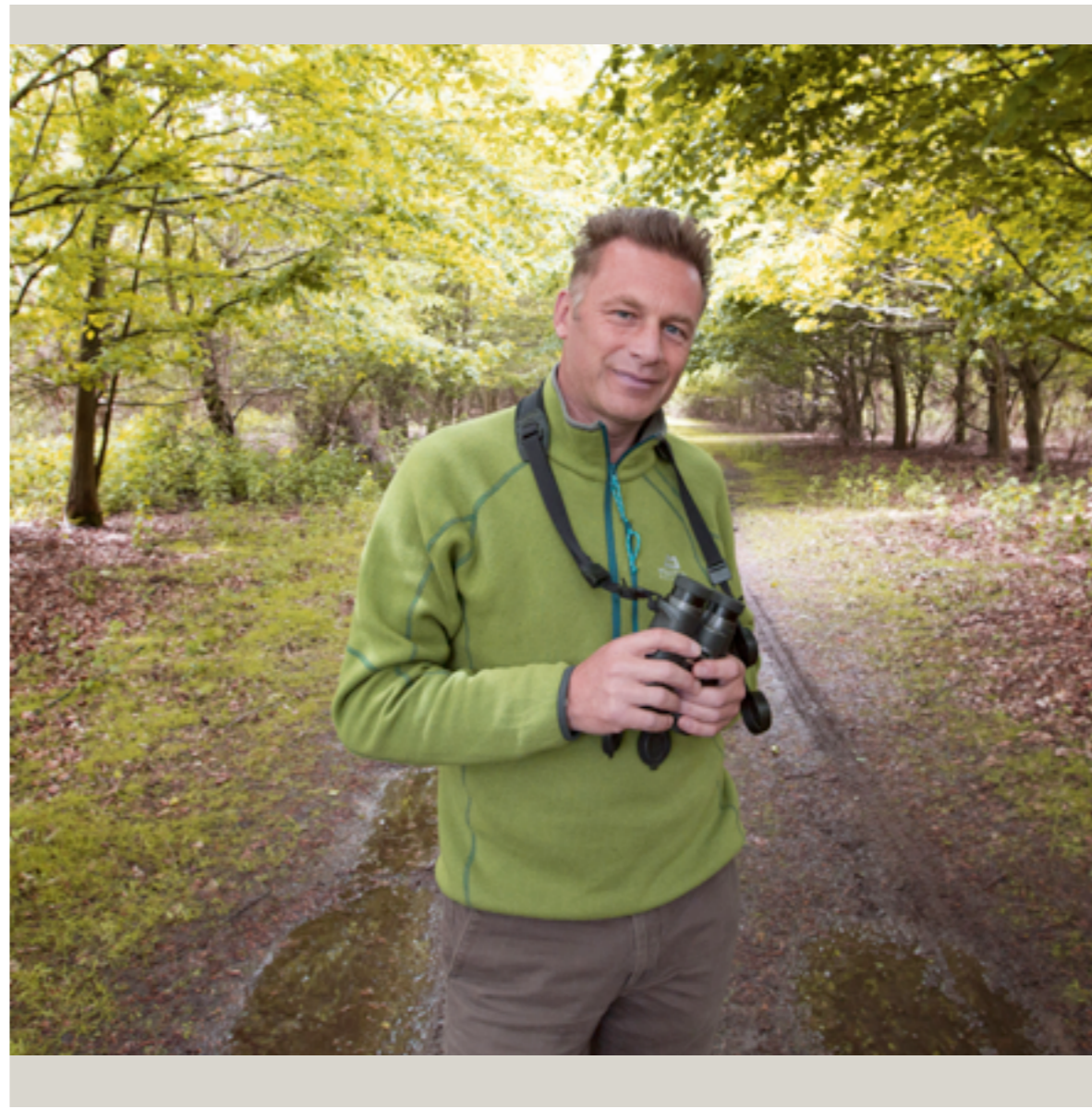
PERSONAL STORIES

How learning a language can transform lives

PADDY ASHDOWN

Former Liberal Democrat leader

"When people ask how many languages I speak, I reply I have forgotten six ... I was a disaster at languages at school. I obtained 5 out of 200 in O-level French - an all-time record. I was badly taught and I could never see the point. But then as a young Royal Marine in Singapore in the early 1960s (a bachelor I should stress), I heard that in Malay there was one word for "let's take off our clothes and tell dirty stories". Suddenly I saw the point. I never found the word, but in the process I learned my first language."



CHRIS PACKHAM  
TV presenter and naturalist

Packham became fluent in French as an adult: "In France, where I have a house, it's quite remote and none of my neighbours speak any English. I rocked up 10 years ago and had no more ability in French than being able to go to Paris and survive a weekend ... I bought some wildlife books at a local bookshop, and because I understood the context, I was able to read them cover to cover and grasp some of what they were saying. Then I said to my neighbours: 'Look, I'll speak to you in French and I want you to constantly correct me. I won't be offended.' And they were great, because they did."

PHOTOGRAPHY: MURDO MACLEOD, THE GUARDIAN; GRAHAM TURNER, THE GUARDIAN; REX FEATURES; GETTY



ALASTAIR CAMPBELL

Writer, broadcaster, former press secretary to Tony Blair

Campbell studied French and German at university: "My dad comes from the Hebrides and his native language was Gaelic; he spoke no English until he went to school ... I think Britain has a bit of a reputation for being lazy and

arrogant with languages. When I was working in government, we dealt with the French quite a lot and with [President] Chirac's people. Even though there were often big differences on policy, I felt I had a very good relationship, in part because I picked up the phone and spoke to them in French. If you make the effort, it's appreciated."

CAROLINE WYATT  
BBC religious affairs correspondent

Wyatt speaks French, German and some Russian: "Speaking the language makes a huge difference to how people relate to you, and the experience that you have of that country ... English is probably the richest language

of all because it is such a global magpie, borrowing from others, and accepting so many 'foreign' words before claiming them as its own. I love the difference in register between the French/Norman words, and the short, sharp Anglo-Saxon vocabulary - never mind the imperial borrowings such as bungalow or pundit."



CHAPTER 7

PERSONAL STORIES

How learning a language can transform lives

**A window on a wider world**

A **moving blog from an anonymous writer** who has depression, makes a case for the power of language learning that many will not have appreciated. For this writer, this debilitating condition is eased, at least a little, by becoming immersed in learning a foreign language.

Languages provide a window on to a wider world, allowing me to connect

"I'm in my mid-30s and I've experienced depression since my teens. In the past few years it has increasingly affected different areas of my life. Once or twice a month, it's so bad that I can't leave the flat for a day or two; even when I feel brighter, I just don't have the energy ... Depression can make your world feel small, and your options few. Languages provide a window on to a wider world, allowing me to connect with people and giving me a route back to the things that I feel are important.

"I take German evening classes after work. For two hours I struggle along with other language learners. Group classes may have a bad

reputation but I find the structure useful. I learn lots on my own, but having to turn up once a week and be around people helps keep me progressing. Depression can make people feel very isolated.

"Conversation exchanges can provide a simple, structured way to connect and help fight the anxiety that can leave me terrified and unable to act. In these settings I can make mistakes - indeed, I

must to progress - and realise that it's not the end of the world. On days when all I can do is retreat to my couch and blanket, what I need most is distraction, something to

calm my brain when every breath feels unbearable. Gameified apps such as Duolingo can provide this distraction. Clicking away helps me feel as if I've done something purposeful; I can turn a tiny part of my brain to something better ... The voice of depression always chides me for not doing more. It is true that learning a language can often feel like an immense task, but breaking it down into steps - one more podcast, one more Duolingo lesson, one more chapter in my textbook - can remind me I am progressing. I can check the number of words studied, the videos watched. This helps me talk back to the voice of depression that says I can't do it. So I'll keep going."



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY

**'What you're describing really resonates'**

Several readers of this touching account were inspired to share their thoughts, including experiences of their own depression:

"Well done, what a great article! I really appreciate what you say about languages being a door into the wider world for times when your world feels small and restrictive. That's how I started, and it makes so much sense. Languages are for everyone. When I was struggling with depression on a daily basis I was learning how to climb on the climbing wall in my local gym. What you're describing about the intense focus and problem-solving in language learning really resonates."

"You are very brave to make such an effort ... and I applaud your success so far! You are so right when you say that one of the biggest hurdles to jump is the isolation. Language is most alive when at least two people are sharing it. When you learn a new one, you open up a whole section of the world as possible friends."

"I have often wondered why, since moving to France several years ago, and immersing myself in the language and culture, my depression is so limited that I no longer take medication. I am intrigued."

**And finally**  
"Bonne chance - machs gut!"

CHAPTER 7

PERSONAL STORIES

How learning a language can transform lives

Language shapes a person

In her account of how precious her native language is to her, Ellie Mae O'Hagan wrote about the pain of forgetting how to speak Welsh.

"Memory is a mysterious thing; we've all had the feeling of estrangement from places and things we once felt an almost psychic connection with. But there

is a peculiar panic that comes with forgetting a language you spoke fluently as a child.

"My heart skips a beat every time I realise that another Welsh word has disappeared from my vocabulary. It's like trying to grasp a solid object that has started to disintegrate in front of you.

I've tried to understand where this panic comes from. I think it's that - more than any other cultural indicators - language has an intimacy and power that shapes a person existentially.

"The Welsh language has a unique character that reminds me of the country's landscape and history. For example, the Welsh

version of describing something as 'music to my ears' is *mêl ar fy mysedd*, or 'honey on my fingers'. To me, that's so much more sensual than the English idiom, and it reminds me of Wales' history of poetry and song, and that living in Wales - with its mountains, beaches and 365-day rain cycle - is often a very sensory experience. When I say that phrase I can almost feel how old the Welsh language is.

"Perhaps the fact that languages are embodied with so much culture and history is why it feels so poignant to forget them - and so painful."

There is a peculiar panic that comes with forgetting a language you spoke fluently



Left: the Welsh language has a poetic feel that is different to English. Above right: watching foreign films, such as Cinema Paradiso, can help with learning a different language

I, too, fear losing my fluency

"Japanese, although learned as an adult rather than as a native language, has a similar hold on me. I have been speaking it every day, and in a considerably larger amount than English, for the past 15 or so years. After 19 years in Japan, I am starting to think quite seriously about moving, either back to the UK or to a different country. However, the thought that I might lose my near-native fluency in spoken Japanese really makes me hesitate. It would definitely feel like losing a part of myself."



There is a Czech saying: "You are as many times a person as the [number of] languages you know." Knowledge of a foreign language is like a flower: you have to care for it, otherwise it will wither and die. The author's experience indicates that this also applies to bilingual people, especially when the 'neglected' language is relatively little spoken. Then again, a major plus of the internet is that foreign language radio, films, online dictionaries are just a few clicks away.

## CONCLUSION

### How learning a language can transform lives

#### An overwhelming message

from the Case for Language Learning is that throughout the UK a great number of people are touched by foreign languages. As this report sets out, they are "living languages". For some, languages have been imposed: a compulsory part of their education, or the result of living in a diverse community. Others have chosen them as a way of improving or stimulating a healthy mind, or just for fun.

For some, charged with upholding national security, foreign languages are part of the UK's defence. Certain economists and employers value the part that languages play in the UK's prosperity. An important role of the Case for Language Learning has been to highlight the many, various and sometimes surprising areas of British life that are shaped by foreign languages.

In the examination of teaching and learning languages, many discussions emphasised the same point: language education,

wherever it takes place, must acknowledge that learning a language is much more than picking up a functional skill. It is about understanding a different culture and appreciating different perspectives on the world.

The therapeutic benefits of learning a language - that it may offer some help in conditions such as dementia or depression - are a reminder that language learning is not always confined to schools and universities or full-time students. The most effective policies to make the UK more multilingual will need to take account of that.

The Case for Language Learning also serves as a warning against many common assumptions. The demand for language skills in a global market, for example, is not straightforward. The views of several experts in this field suggested it would be wrong to think that fluency in a foreign language guarantees employment. Rather, they argued, candidates need to make the case as to why a foreign language is an asset in their application, as with any other personal quality.

The idea that living among people who speak a foreign language promotes tolerance and understanding of other cultures was also challenged by some commentators, who felt strongly

that communities of many diverse languages could make native English speakers feel resentful and alienated. Professionals dedicated to community cohesion emphasised that their work often means working intensively with individual families. Several contributors regretted a sense that being bilingual is undervalued in the UK, and in several parts of the world, and that this is leading to both a waste of talent and endangering the survival of some minority languages.

The poor take-up of languages in schools and universities seriously

threatens any ambition to make the UK better at speaking and understanding foreign languages and gaining the accompanying benefits. But this is not a reason to despair. Other subjects - the sciences, for example - have faced similar crises and have shown how the right campaigning strategies can, given time, raise public awareness and an appreciation of their benefits.

The Case for Language Learning, with its emphasis on how people are "living languages", provides a solid platform from which to continue and build the campaign. ●

Living it: learning a foreign language is about appreciating different perspectives on the world

Learning a foreign language is much more than simply picking up a functional skill



PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY



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