

Fears of Language Deficits in a Post-Brexit Britain

Submitted by: Relations Group

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A declining interest in learning languages is setting Britain back in the international playing field.

As Brexit goes forward and Britain's economic and political ties to the EU weaken, many of our multi-linguists are leaving the country for the EU. Home-grown foreign speakers are dwindling in their numbers as language learning drops in our national list of priorities. Yet now more than ever before we need to focus on sharpening our linguistic abilities if we want to keep up with the rest of the world.

As of this year, 61% of the UK population doesn't know how to communicate in anything other than English. This percentage will continue to increase despite our best efforts as EU and foreign nationals find themselves having to relocate. In contrast, countries all over the globe make learning English mandatory; of the 1.5 billion speakers, only 375 million are native speakers. That's over a billion foreign people who have the linguistic tools to keep up with a rapidly transforming international environment. Britain's shortcomings in this area are bound to become clearer as the years pass, and the polyglot population migrates.

So what makes us so certain that English will remain the global language we've often taken it for granted to be? Outside of the UK, Chinese, Hindi, and Spanish have overtaken English as the languages with the highest numbers of native speakers, shooting them to the forefront of political and economic international discussions.

However fighting back at our declining interest in language learning and waning exam results is proving fruitless. Is it our national ambivalence towards other cultures and languages? Or are we suffering from an out-dated learning approach? British polyglot Olly Richard had the following comments:

"Here in Britain, we have long benefited from a type of linguistic comfort which may soon come back to bite us. When we go on holiday, we expect to be catered to in English. If we work in business, politics, science, or technology, our communication with our foreign colleagues is in English. We live on an island, isolated from our European neighbours, who, in any case, have adopted English as a lingua franca. And when it comes to our entertainment, our American cousins have provided us with more mass media than we could consume in a lifetime...in English, of course! Is it any wonder young people in Britain find little need to learn other languages?"

If our track record for the past few decades is anything to go by, learning a language at GCSE or A-Level for two hours a week isn't exactly an effective route to becoming a polyglot. Culturally vibrant, immersive methods of teaching enthuse students and drive them to working hard consistently and effectively.

While our in-class teaching has maintained the same stale methods year in, year out, foreign exchange student programmes have revamped their look in the form of apps like HelloTalk. This new method of learning is being described as a language exchange, which creates portals across the world for learners to access the most up-to-date, linguistically authentic experience they can. With every 11-year-old carrying a device in their pocket, the dawn of the language exchange era provides new opportunities for

students to learn outside the classroom: they can learn at their own pace, in a fun, and financially viable way.

If Britain wants to stay ahead of the game in the current political landscape, we need to replenish our supply of skilled foreign language speakers. By encouraging British people to pick up their devices and engage in the 21st century language exchange, we stand a chance to keep up with an increasingly multi-lingual world.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_survey_2017_0.pdf (p.3)

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/>

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/25/languages-exams-test-league-tables-schools-fall-pupils>

About HelloTalk

HelloTalk is the world's largest language exchange network. The service connects more than 7 million native speakers to teach each other over

150 languages via a free mobile app. HelloTalk is an international team based in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China