

Language Learning in crisis: A dangerous question?

A recent report by the [Higher Education Policy Institute](#) (HEPI) has announced a crisis in language learning in the UK. [The report](#), published in January 2020, is noteworthy because, unlike other HEPI reports, it treats a single discipline.

The reason for this choice is not just the serious decline in the study of foreign languages: the situation appears in fact to be going from poor to worse. Only 32 % of 16-to-30-year olds in the UK currently say they are “confident” reading and writing in another language. The EU average is 89 %, with many speaking three or four languages well. Definitions of “confident” doubtless vary, but this trend is worrying, the report says:

The trend towards overlooking subjects which teach us to analyse the human condition and empathise with others is dangerous.

Many feel that the problems starts with schools: a labour government removed the compulsory study of additional languages at GCSE in 2004. And certainly, education in languages has long been a problem, with sporadic teaching, dubious curriculum choices and, speaking from experience teaching French in secondary, further and higher education, examining practices that reflect a desire for expediency rather than efficacy, appropriacy or relevance. I can still remember being asked by my mentor to teach anglicised pronunciation as a novice French teacher.

More important, though, is the misrepresentation of languages generally as a tool for enhancing trade and employability. It’s perfectly true, of course, that speaking a foreign language can enhance one’s credibility in the global marketplace: collaborators will not just take you more seriously but actually seek you out if you are able to communicate effectively.

But being able to communicate effectively means more - much more – than being able to buy a baguette, book a Calabrian hotel room or regurgitate a rote-learned commentary on the history of glühwein. The promotion of languages must go well beyond the idea that they serve essentially as a means of transacting business. If you want a business relationship, to understand a foreign market or negotiate a contract, you will need to feel far more than just “confident” or “fluent” in a foreign language: you’ll need to be able to understand others as people and also express yourself as a rounded human being with the kind of broad cultural understanding that can only come from a rounded education.

If we want commercial success – and the impact of this ideology on our shared resources so far is increasingly open to question – it’s high time we stopped using our education system as a means of delivering bitesize chunks of quasi-knowledge to young people whose future lies exclusively in their potential as taxpayers. Languages – ancient and modern – offer one of the best ways of developing the skills and knowledge that as humans we prize the most: understanding, imagination, empathy. What Richard Dawkins calls our “[monoglottish disgrace](#)” is not just embarrassing, it’s downright dangerous.