



## Report 2020



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# **The British print press and the foreign language gap in the age of Brexit**

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## 1 Introduction

The result of the Brexit referendum of 2016 marked a crucial turning point for the United Kingdom: as it leaves the European Union and the Single Market, the country faces a long way to establish their position in the international stage regarding both diplomacy and the global market.

However, recent data indicate a significant skill shortage with regard to languages: the gap is causing a loss of 3.5% of the country's GDP (Foreman-Peck & Wang, 2014), mainly due to overdependence on Anglophone markets and hesitation in tackling new markets. Small-medium enterprises cite language and cultural barriers as the main causes of concern, making them reluctant in entering complex negotiations with growing markets such as Asia and the Middle East (Holmes, B., 2018).

Hogan-Brun (2018) draws a comparison with Switzerland, where the economic value of multilingualism represents 10% of GDP as people in all sorts of professions speak multiple languages thanks to joint efforts of the government and the private sector in providing all-encompassing education and training to prepare citizens for the job market.

Globalisation and diversity transformed the market, meaning that today's consumers will speak multiple languages and represent a wide range of different cultures and employers are becoming increasingly aware that language skills are valuable. A study has found consensus among large organisations and small-medium enterprises that a potential employee who speaks a language other than English at home "should regard their bilingualism as an asset" and that, conversely, monolingual candidates "will be at a disadvantage in the future job market". Speaking at least an additional language to English represents an added value to primary technical skills required in each sector, including STEM: a hybrid skill set is recognised as a significant advantage.

As it is becoming increasingly evident that a push for language learning is needed to boost trade after Brexit, it becomes apparent that at present there are no policies in place to tackle the issue. that number of policies that reflected a deep interest in the opportunities that Britain could access by becoming a multilingual nation. Previous education reforms introduced to improve the situation, such as a compulsory GCSE since 2004 such have been scrapped, causing the rates of language GCSE to fall drastically. In 2003, 73% of GCSE students in the UK sat at least one language exam. In 2015 it was only 48 per cent (Dean, A. 2016, October 28). More recent data show that this trend is progressing as foreign language learning is at its lowest level in UK secondary schools since the turn of the millennium, with drops of between 30% and 50% since 2013 in the numbers taking GCSE language courses in the worst affected areas in England. (Jefferys, B. 2019, February 27).

With Britain facing the prospect of an uncertain future as this severe skill shortage will significantly impact its market and economical growth, is the media putting this issue on the spotlight, and if yes, how? In this report I will analyse a number of articles from the period between 2016 and 2019, sourced from different British newspapers and tabloids on the topic of language learning in order to provide a general overview of how this is portrayed in the print press, the different ideologies influencing such portrayal and recurring patterns. My methodology will be based on the principles of discourse studies as defined by Van Dijk (2009): equal attention will be placed on obvious expedients to frame a story (by leaving out some information, for example) and finer linguistic resources such as foregrounding and overstatement. The analysis will also examine discourse content sourced by other elements that constitute the article, such as pictures.

## 2 Findings

### **Tabloids' coverage on the topic of language**

The first group of articles presented was sourced by three British tabloids - a press format that owes its noun to its compact appearance and size but has through time been associated with low-quality, sensationalistic journalism (Örnebring, H., & Jönsson, A. M., 2004). However, their role in shaping the nation's public opinion is particularly relevant: the *Metro*, *The Daily Mail* and the *Sun* are the three most circulated papers in the UK (Mayhew 2019, 14 February). The *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* are ideologically positioned to the right, while the *Metro*, though owned by the *Daily Mail's* mother company DMGT, is overall fairly neutral in its coverage according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

### **“MPs are accused of making taxpayers 'subsidise their hobbies' after running up a £21,000 bill for learning languages including Japanese, Icelandic and Georgian” – *The Daily Mail***

This article reports on the fact that twenty-two Members of Parliament took some language courses over the course of 2018 which were subsidised by the government “in line with their parliamentary duties”. The heavily critical approach is evident from the headline, as learning languages is equated to a hobby, thus trivialised. MPs are overtly criminalised: the verb “accused” is used repeatedly in the piece, especially in a passive, third-person form, leading the reader to think such is the general consensus. Moreover, names of individual MPs are matched with their pictures in a “name and shame” fashion.



Japanese lessons for Labour's Paul Farrelly (pictured left) came in at £2,900 in 2017-18 - on top of a £3,351 bill for the previous year. SNP MP Angus MacNeil (pictured right) had £500 worth of Icelandic tuition, taking his total costs over the past four years to more than £4,300

On the contrary, no mention is made of counter argument or benefits that could derive from this language provision, let alone the overall Brexit context.

The authority interviewed on the subject, James Price, is the campaign manager of TaxPayers' Alliance, a right-wing libertarian pressure group campaigning for low taxation – hence the focus on the burden on “taxpayers”. He claims “they also benefit from subsidised bars and restaurants”, again trivialising language classes and comparing them to a treat.

**“British children aren’t learning foreign languages after the Brexit vote” – *The Metro***

The tabloid here reports on the figures regarding the foreign language gap affecting British young people which, according to the British Council, will cause damage to trade in the billions of pounds each year, establishing a link between trade and language learning.

Particular focus is placed on post-Brexit needs, as it claims language deficit will make situation worse and reports on a government program to increase language learning and target for Mandarin.

Furthermore, a pupil in a London school is quoted supporting learning languages as a sign of effort in creating relationships abroad. The head of language of the school raises the “misconception” that English is the only language needed which explains the lack of interest in learning more.

### **“All kids will have to study a foreign language GCSE in a bid to boost Britain’s bilingual skills post-Brexit” - *The Sun***

The core subject of this article is the government’s intention to get more students to study languages at GCSE level as it struggles to reach targets related to the European Baccalaureate reform. However, the tone paints this move as a threat, as schools “will be ordered to sign pupils up for foreign language GCSEs” or else “they will be marked down”. The statement in the headline “all kids will have to study GCSEs from Sept” is misleading: the target is set for three out of four students.

The minister Nick Gibbs’s statement explains the benefits relating to post-Brexit situation and trade:

As we leave the European Union and raise our profile in global markets, it is no longer acceptable for the UK to languish at the bottom of international league tables of the ability to speak foreign languages.

The journalist, however, does not elaborate on it.

### **More Brits are learning foreign slang as the number speaking second language in the UK soars – *The Sun***

The paper reports on a survey conducted by online language recruitment firm Top Language Jobs which found that British office workers are learning foreign slang. The company’s founder Alex Furlis, of Greek origins, comments on the result and declares: “English is my second language. That has led me to great opportunities”.

The overall line adopted for this piece, though, seems to twist the meaning of his words and the purpose of this light-hearted study. The subject of language learning is treated in a humorous way trivialising it: learning some expressions from colleagues is good for “banter”, but learning and knowing English leads to opportunities for your career. Despite the fact the authority quoted in the article built a business based on the opportunities bilingualism and multilingualism offer compared to English monolingualism and meant exactly the opposite of what is implied. This is made evident in the caption under his picture, stating “Managing Director of Top Language Jobs Alex Furlis says learning a new language can help ‘broaden your career’”: a point worth mentioning in the main body of the article which is relegated to a marginal position.

### **The foreign language gap in broadsheet newspapers**

The following two articles were published on the Guardian and the Telegraph, two examples of broadsheet newspapers, or “quality press”, in lieu to their perceived higher journalistic standards. Both report on the language gap in the British education system and the numerous issues it is affected by. However, only the Guardian links this problem with Brexit.

While the Guardian is identified as a centre-left wing paper, the Telegraph is associated to a centre-right position by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

**“Brexit ‘putting pupils off modern foreign languages’” - *The Guardian***

This article on the low number of entries for language GCSEs reports that teachers are concerned the difficulty of these courses and their relative exams are discouraging students. The quoted study by British Council, an organisation working independently from the government but government-funded, highlights a “misguided perception” that learning a language will prove useless after leaving EU

Lower participation to exchange programmes and trips abroad due to lack of funding and Brexit uncertainty also cause concern. Moreover, it is raised that children from disadvantaged families and pupils with lower academic results are much less likely to take up languages than their better-off classmates. Vicky Gough, schools advisor for the Council, states that pupils are “put off by the difficulty of exams and a sense that languages just aren’t for them” Following this foregrounding, the article discusses concerns on current grading system putting non-native speakers at a disadvantage.

**“Children find foreign languages so stressful they are being signed off by a GP, headteachers told” - *The Telegraph***

The issue raised by the National Association of Headteachers in this article relates to students getting a doctor’s note to avoid language classes because they find them too stressful.

The head of the association Rob Campbell states that “children studying GCSEs get predicted grades and it can be common that the weaker subject of theirs is languages”, leading them to fear risking failure.

Campbell also notes students also opposed to learning languages for “cultural” reason as they see them as irrelevant but opposes recent government measures to force children to study languages including linking Ofsted rating to language uptake rates.

A response from a government representative is included: learning languages necessary to “compete with [...] peers around the world”, but “language teaching[...] is not designed to be stressful” and “schools should encourage their pupils to work hard and achieve well without this being at the expense of their wellbeing”. The article publishes figures that show some progress has been made: since the introduction of Ebacc in 2010, the number of students taking language GCSE risen from 40% to 46%. At no point in the text Brexit is mentioned, nor the author speculates on the cultural reasons mentioned by Campbell.

### **Opinions on the language gap**

The final articles I have analysed here are opinion pieces published on the Guardian and the Independent, a tabloid with a centre-left political stance (Editorial 2017, 5 June). Unlike the previously examined articles, these do not need to maintain a balance perspective and provide a more overtly politicised insight on the topic discussed.

#### **“Learn another European language – and give two fingers to Brexit Britain” - *The Guardian***

In this piece the author encourages readers to learn languages as an act of defiance to the current climate of Euroscepticism, praising Conservative minister Jeremy Hunt for delivering a speech in Japanese to a local audience. Examining different issues related to language learning, she disputes the argument of difficulty: STEM subject have been growing in popularity, all thanks to efforts in promoting them.

Speaking languages help “building bridges and accepting differences – all skills sorely in need of some practice, judging by the current tone of public conversation.” In this sense, it is

“a disarming act, a gesture of empathy and respect. If you’re not actually very good at it then in some ways all the better; at least it’s obvious you’re making an effort, which is why typing furiously into Google Translate doesn’t quite have the same effect.”

#### **Brits are so bad at languages, we couldn't even translate the Brexit white paper properly – it's an embarrassment – *Independent***

The author here also encourages readers to take the matter in their own hands and “put some real time into learning another language as an “investment” on their “education”, their “understanding of the world” and as “a basic mark of respect”. The element of effort is again emphasised, as she recommends not only starting to learn but also working on it for years to reach fluency. This would go in opposition to the “sheepish complacency” about lack of language skills which British people display and sometimes justify by blaming sense of insecurity because of possible embarrassing mistakes. This, according to the author, accounts for the “embarrassing” poor translation of the Brexit white paper in German, the starting point for the piece and clear example of the “enormous cultural price tag” caused by the language gap.

### **3 Discussion**

The analysis has uncovered a number of general trends in the way the issue of language learning in Britain is portrayed across different newspapers.

The first distinction arises from the intensity of the coverage on the issue, which is clearly linked to the type of newspaper. The search for tabloid articles on the subject, perhaps with the exception of the *Independent*, has proven difficult, as there were very few articles that



approached the issue, even vaguely. This proves in itself that this part of the media has for the most part not identified the issue as such and where it has, it has not shown much interest. Furthermore, none of those articles tackled the subject with in-depth analyses and neither I was able to find a single opinion piece on the matter from tabloids other than the *Independent*. Their ideological framing of the news they were reporting, though undoubtedly present and effective, cannot be and is not as overt as it would be if it was officially marked as an opinion and therefore is more likely to be taken at face value by readers. It is not a coincidence that the use of visual linguistic means – the pictures coupled with the MPs names and individual expenses - was only found in the Daily Mail article.

In contrast, broadsheets devoted more frequent and thorough coverage, with news reporting accompanied by opinion pieces expanding on specific events, especially in The Guardian. The main difference between the two articles lies in the fact that, while they mention similar problems raised by professionals in the education sector, the Guardian places a significant emphasis on the issue of Brexit and the cultural climate related to it, while the Telegraph does not mention them at all. While the former raises the alarm over the increasingly widespread view that speaking foreign languages will be soon useless due to Britain leaving the EU, the latter purposefully avoids the topic, even when the authority interviewed on the matter makes mention of troubling cultural reasons behind the unpopularity of language GCSEs. A stance most likely linked to the paper's pro-leave position (Bennet, A. 2016, 21 June).

Overall, the two political leanings represented by these publications showed consistency in their stances on the topic. The position of left wing and centre-left papers is similar: the lack of foreign language skills is damaging for trade and cultural links and must be acted upon as a matter of urgency. The causes are mixed: the education system seem to be failing its students but most of the blame is placed on the British historically complacent attitude which is exacerbated by push to withdraw from the world because of Brexit.

The position of right wing papers, on the other hand, ranges from absolute disinterest to dismissal of Brexit implications on, for example, parents discouraging children to take up languages in school.

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