

# Opinion articles

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## Global Britain and the Question of Communication

by Charles Burdett

*The article begins by considering the potential meanings of the phrase ‘Global Britain’ and considers the importance of communication within any international strategy. In this context, it foregrounds the necessity of joined-up thinking concerning the teaching of modern foreign languages. It looks at the implications of the proposed reforms to the subject content of GCSEs and argues that the formal consideration of culture needs to form part of the way in which the qualification is taught and assessed.*

The question of Britain’s relationship with the rest of the world, today more than ever, occupies an extremely prominent position within public discourse. Having decided to remove itself from the administrative infrastructure of the European Union and untrammelled access to the extensive marketplace that it offers, the UK will for years face the question of how it constructs a new relationship with its trading partners, its long-standing allies, and its more distant contacts. In government circles the phrase ‘Global Britain’ has been used to evoke the vision of a country that is ‘open, outward-looking and confident’ as it responds to the ever-greater challenges that dominate the world stage.

It is worth thinking about the wider implications of a phrase such as this. Clearly, the idea is that Britain is prepared to play an important role in global debates on issues from development to climate change. It is also the case that in developing a growing network of international partners, Britain will ensure its future prosperity and affirm its identity as a country that thrives on the possibilities that exchange affords. If this is the course that the country has set for itself, then it is as well to remember that exchange, to be properly termed as such, involves a dialogue in which each party is willing to learn from the other, in which a strong element of mutual understanding is key, and in which each party is not intent only on affirming its position but is open to the notion of change. If this is not the case, then it is more appropriate to talk about transaction rather than exchange.

In negotiating the pathway towards the kind of open, globally engaged country that is envisaged by the phrase 'Global Britain', it is difficult to underestimate the role that communication serves. If we take the medium to long-term view, then it is clearly necessary to increase the number of school leavers and graduates who are at home in using more than one language, who understand that no language can be learnt to any degree of fluency without an understanding of the system of practices and lifeways of which it is a part, and who are aware that linguistic and cultural literacy is only achieved with direct experience of life abroad. Though one may very well lament Britain's withdrawal from the Erasmus programme, it is of some consolation that the benefit of study or work placements in other countries is fully recognized by the newly launched Turing scheme for student mobility.

Given the direction in which Britain's foreign policy is taking the country, it is more important than ever that the education system responds to the demands that are placed upon it. The CBI has been arguing for at least a decade that we do not produce enough linguistically and culturally skilled graduates and that the failure to do so places the equivalent of an additional tax burden on British businesses. The point is not simply that good language is good business but rather that a knowledge of language facilitates intercultural cooperation and exchange. Intercultural literacy means not only being able to express ourselves and understand others across national borders but doing so with critical insight into how we perceive ourselves and are perceived by others.

Linguistic and cultural diversity are a fact of everyday social life in the UK as they are everywhere else. How the education system draws on this reality and this resource is an important question for the sector as it attempts to meet the challenges of both the present and the future. The essential point is that language teaching in schools not only introduces students to the basics of how languages are learnt, but it is also fundamentally concerned with the multilingual and multicultural environment in which students learn and, therefore, with critical reflection on what we take to be familiar and unfamiliar.

Even the briefest consideration of these issues indicates the necessity of intense, joined-up, and inclusive thinking concerning the teaching of modern foreign languages. If we think about language teaching as an important element in the way in which we expand the nature of our contact with other societies around the world, then it is clearly also important that what is taught in schools is strongly connected with the discipline of Modern Languages as it is understood and practiced in Higher Education.

Though there are, of course, variations in the way in which individual universities interpret the disciplinary field, it is nevertheless seen as an expert mode of inquiry. One in which the development of linguistic proficiency is strongly integrated with the study of culture, particularly as it expresses the creative imagination. One in which the concentration on a defined geographical area leads to an enhanced understanding of the transnational flow of people, ideas, and practices that constitutes the global reality that we all inhabit. And finally, one in which increasing attention is paid to the practical applications of the ability to move between linguistic and cultural systems.

The role that education plays at all levels in supporting the needs of society in an increasingly globalized context is brought very sharply into focus by the current consultation on proposed changes to the content of GCSEs in Modern Foreign Languages. Any change that is implemented at this level not only has consequences for thousands of students but inevitably has implications for what is studied at A level and within degree courses – in the sense that the proper functioning of each stage depends on how well students are prepared by what they have studied before. There is, of course, much in the proposals that is to be welcomed, especially the desire to increase student uptake. But there are areas of major concern. One is the proposal that cultural content will not be specified or tested in the revised subject content.

There are several reasons why it is very problematic to focus on language skills in a way that does not adequately recognise the importance of cultural context. To begin with, one of the greatest motivations of students (of whatever age) in studying languages is precisely the access that it gives to understanding how cultural practices operate in different parts of the world. It is very rare to meet someone who is not interested in travel and the opportunities it affords to engage with other people, other modes of social interaction, and other perceptions of the way that the world works. Secondly, there is a serious risk of a chasm opening between how a subject is experienced at school and at university where the analysis of cultural practice is of such importance. Every healthy disciplinary structure relies upon the close articulation between the two. What is true for Maths, History or Biology is also true for Modern Languages. If there is a disjunction between the two, then the school curriculum is impoverished and the viability of university courses is compromised. And this at a time in which it is more important than ever to promote ways of developing a more global consciousness.

Most crucially of all, if the formal consideration of culture is not included in the teaching of languages, one risks perpetuating the notion that language is a neutral mode of communication rather than a tool that carries with it a whole series of cultural and social assumptions. If we are alive to the diversity of perception that is encoded in the very form of language, then we begin to understand the true extent of the complexities that are involved in any genuine and meaningful kind of exchange. That recognition and that understanding is vital for the UK's understanding of itself and its future, both as a diverse and inclusive community and as a country with a role to play on the global stage.

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