

26 The age of the monolingual has passed: multilingualism is the new normal

Bernardette Holmes¹

1. My personal story in languages

From the first moment at the age of seven, when I picked up a second-hand picture book called *Das Braune Hühnchen und die weite, weite Welt* (which, if my memory serves me well was a Pixi Buch Nummer 15), I believe that becoming a teacher of languages was simply a matter of time. Although I didn't speak German then, it was a magical story, and I set about trying to work out from the pictures and the words that looked similar to English, exactly what was happening to the little brown hen in her blue and white-spotted dress, carrying her rolled umbrella, as she marched out bravely to discover the wide, wide world.

In the County Grammar School for Girls, it was not possible to study sciences and languages after the age of fourteen. This was a turning point. I gave up Physics to study German and Chemistry to study Latin. French was part of our core curriculum. I specialised in languages at A Level and added Ancient Greek and Ancient History, going on to read Latin and French at University.

There were a number of career paths which beckoned me, including the Foreign Office, but after a year abroad as a Foreign Languages Assistant in a huge Lycée d'Etat with over 2000 pupils, I was hooked. I had a passion for languages and literature, which combined with my experience of living through another culture during my year abroad, persuaded me that I should teach languages to other young people and offer them the same opportunities that I had been given. I believe that learning languages and spending a year abroad shaped my life, helping me to define my own identity and future path.

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How to cite this chapter: Holmes, B. (2016). The age of the monolingual has passed: multilingualism is the new normal. In E. Corradini, K. Borthwick and A. Gallagher-Brett (Eds), *Employability for languages: a handbook* (pp. 181-187). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.cbq2016.481>

I have enjoyed a very wide-ranging career in languages education as a teacher, adviser, inspector, teacher educator, researcher, curriculum developer and policy adviser. I have worked in schools, universities and for government departments. It has been a privilege to work on various iterations of the National Curriculum for Languages since its inception, playing a central role in articulating the pedagogy and support structures needed for coherent development of language learning in primary and secondary schools. My recent research interests in employability and working with employers during the Born Global project (see Notes on text at the end) has only strengthened my conviction that language capability and intercultural competence are essential elements in the personal, academic and cultural development of all young people.

The most important thing now for all teachers working with the new curriculum documents and new specifications is to read between the lines. The lack of prescription of specific content gives every teacher the opportunity to develop a programme of learning that will inspire young people to be curious, to explore the world around them and to think differently. Sharing songs, stories, and films across cultures, asking and answering questions about your own and other's lives from the earliest stages, making connections, virtual and real, with other people, and developing a greater understanding of what it is to be 'born global' will equip our young people to face the many challenges that will lie ahead, in the hope of finding fresh solutions to some of the seemingly intractable problems that we face. Willingness to be open to other languages and cultures are a defining characteristic of global education for the 21st century, transforming the way we see the world and the way the world sees us.

2. Languages today – how are languages used and how proficient do we need to be?

Findings from Born Global show that while English may be the predominant language of global business, it is certainly not the only language deployed in dealing with international clients. In larger transnational organisations and in

Small to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), a wide range of other languages are used. Every language is an asset.

The most commonly spoken languages across enterprises of all sizes in the UK are French, German and Spanish, the languages of our major trading partners. Larger companies have access to native speakers of Mandarin Chinese, Italian, Arabic, Russian and Japanese in their global teams, and there is some use of languages from the newer markets such as Brazilian Portuguese, Turkish and Hindi. Companies that have been involved in recent offshoring of elements of their global business say that they are using the languages of the new locations such as Bahasa Indonesian and Bahasa Malay.

In contrast, SMEs that are actively using languages to run their business tend to be using languages from the community, like Polish and Bulgarian, in addition to the most widely used languages, French, German and Spanish. Among the participating SMEs in the Born Global survey, there is currently the same small proportion of SMEs using Lithuanian, as there are SMEs using Mandarin Chinese. This is an indication of the rich diversity of languages spoken in our local communities.

In predicting the language needs of the future, seven out of ten employers from the larger companies in the survey call for Mandarin Chinese. Close to five out of ten call for Spanish and close to four out of ten identify Arabic as one of the top three most useful languages to extend business opportunities in the future. The SMEs prioritise French, German and Spanish, as they seek to strengthen their international operations within the European Union. There is also a growing demand for Mandarin Chinese from SMEs interested in new languages with one in five saying that more speakers of Mandarin Chinese would be helpful for economic growth. The reality is that there can be *just in time* demand for a whole range of different languages, as technology connects businesses to potential clients worldwide through the internet.

Employers believe that language skills add value in a number of ways. Employers report that languages in addition to English are used internally and externally.

The current labour force is multilingual and culturally diverse, so conversations which involve more than one language take place normally between colleagues who share each other's language(s). Often colleagues are working in virtual global networks. Sharing a language can help to sustain those networks and help them to work more effectively.

The areas of external professional activity where language skills are most helpful are in building new client relationships and in strengthening existing client relationships. Using a client's language builds rapport and trust. A great deal of professional activity in all sectors of employment relies on leveraging relationships. When clients come from a different language community, if a company can connect using a common language, this adds to their credibility and to their competitive advantage. Contracts can be won or lost on an organisation's ability to speak the client's language and understand a client's culture.

Phatic skills at basic and intermediate level (CEFR A1 - B1²) are of value as they can break the ice and connect people through social conversation about familiar and personal matters. The simple remarks in the carpark about the weather; the exchange of sports news in the lift; the family introductions told by sharing photos on Facebook over coffee, all add value to establishing new client relationships, if they are conducted in the client's language.

Serious negotiation at boardroom level, or presentations of business strategy or running seminars about sector specific knowledge require far higher levels of fluency (CEFR B2 - C1, as a minimum with the need for C2 competence in many instances).

Reading skills are important. The ability to skim a company document for gist or read market research reports in advance of a meeting in the original language

2. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR), available at www.coe.int/lang-CEFR. The CEFR describes language proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, and C1 and C2. The CEFR is available in 39 different languages.

deepens the understanding of a company's values and cultural norms. Those with language skills can access a broader research base and are not forced to limit their business interactions to those organisations that can speak English.

Employers recognise that a graduate with languages skills and cultural competence adds value to their organisation.

3. Languages 2020 - 2030

In a world where one in four people speaks English and the other three out of four are likely to be learning English, it would be disingenuous to suggest that speaking English as the global language is anything other than a significant asset now and for the future.

Technology makes it possible and pragmatic to choose a global language, and there are significant advantages in the use of English as the lingua franca to the knowledge economy, global research, international diplomacy and business. Yet, to the generation of young people who can be described as 'born global', living in a hyper-connected, diverse and mobile society, speaking only one language can never be regarded as enough.

To achieve personal, academic and professional goals to a global standard will require a global mind-set, an international outlook and cultural agility. These attributes are more likely to be fostered in a person who has stepped beyond the confines of the first language; the person who can see the world through another lens; the person who can read the world's history in its original languages; the person who can mediate between cultures; the person who can successfully connect to another culture using another language. English as the lingua franca will take you so far along the way, but the journey continues through other languages.

Whilst technology enables us to connect across geographical borders and time zones and the use of English facilitates international communication, analytics

of internet use³ show other languages are increasing their share of internet traffic. Cyberspace will become as multilingual as the high street, and technology, rather than promoting a monolingual, homogenous environment, opens the door to cultural diversity and the prospect of multilingual exchange. Working globally will require an understanding of an ever-widening range of languages and cultures, as we expand into different markets. Diversity means that we must represent the clients we serve.

Globalisation grows commensurate to trade liberalisation. This enables companies to outsource or offshore elements of their production in different parts of the world. When they do this, they invest in infrastructure and build up operations in different countries, recruiting highly skilled multilingual teams made up of local recruits and international recruits. While English may be used to connect groups in different countries and may be used as the lingua franca in multilingual teams, day-to-day operations are normally done local-to-local, using a local language. There will be as many languages used in global companies as there are locations and even more languages in use relative to the language and cultural profile of the client base.

The recruits of the future will require hybrid skill sets. They will need sector specific knowledge, international experience and a range of transversal employability skills such strategic leadership skills, problem-solving, global client management skills and commercial awareness. All of these skills are associated with human relations and these are developed through global communication skills in a range of languages. The age of the indulged monolingual has passed. Multilingualism is the new normal.

Notes on text

Bernardette Holmes is principal researcher of the Born Global project (http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Born_Global.cfm). Born Global is a major policy

3. Internet World Users by Language Copyright 2014 Miniwatts Marketing Group, retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>.

research project which forms an integral part of the British Academy's Languages and Quantitative Skills Programme. It builds on previous research into the demand and supply of language skills in the UK.

The project sets out to elicit new knowledge about the extent and nature of language needs for employment to inform government language policy development and implementation.

The research aims to develop a deeper understanding of how language is used in professional contexts and how language needs are met.

It explores employers' attitudes towards language skills, recruitment and remuneration behaviours and their expectations of language competence and use.

A central purpose of the exercise is to bring forward current evidence about the value of language skills to organisations and to individuals, and, in particular, to evaluate the contribution of language skills to employability and to career progression.

At a time of significant policy reform, the report captures employers' views about the relevance of language capability to future economic growth and to the development of education and skills for the current and next generations.



Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

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Employability for languages: a handbook
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Cover design and frog picture by © 2016 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Cover illustration by © 2016 Nicolas Fenix (www.nicolasfenix.com)

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-37-7 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-38-4 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-39-1 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juin 2016.