



British Council

Inquiry Session: The role of English language in maintaining relationships between the UK and Europe

20 March 09:30-11:30, Boardroom, British Council

Attendees:

John Baron MP, Chair, British Council APPG
Khalid Mahmood MP, Shadow Europe Minister, House of Commons
Andy Mackay, Country Director Spain, British Council
Amy Price, Policy & Public Affairs Manager, Publishers Association
Beccy Wigglesworth, Head of Operations, International House World
Catrin Diamantino, Chief Executive Officer, Bell English
Chris Brandwood, Director English EU, British Council
Dr Catherine Walter, Emeritus Fellow in Applied Linguistics, University of Oxford
Dr Ernesto Macaro, Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Oxford
Freya Thomas Monk, Senior Vice President of English & Schools, Pearson
Graham Seed, European Projects Manager, Cambridge Assessment English
Jon Burton, Chief Executive, IATEFL
Mariya Afzal, Country Director, Canada, British Council
Melike Berker, Policy and Parliamentary Officer, British Council (Secretariat)
Paul Scott, Head of Department, Learning English, BBC
Rebecca Maher, Stakeholder Engagement Manager, British Council (Observer)
Sarah Cooper, Chief Executive, English UK

Main Points:

- The English language is cited as a real soft power asset. History shows that people who have studied English, especially in the UK, or experienced UK culture through teaching centres in their own country are more likely to visit or study in the UK and to have a positive perspective overall
- UK values are more likely to be understood through the teaching of the English language This is being tried and tested by English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI).
- English language teaching, its legacy and soft power benefits can be seen across diplomatic relations with Europe and is increasing the possibility of positive relations.
- Multilateral programmes such as Erasmus+ and networks like International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) are integral in enabling the sharing of knowledge and techniques and placing the UK at the heart of English language teaching.
- Language learners' needs are changing, and the English language sector needs to adapt to that in order to remain relevant
- Visa regulations should consider the English language sector and their impact should be measured in the event of changes to these regulations.
- Copyright regulations need to remain flexible to enable the publishing sector to adapt to various audiences across the world.
- Bilateral recognition of qualifications needs to be maintained.



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- The UK does not “own” English language teaching anymore but should aim to remain relevant and a thought leader across the world through digital and other teaching techniques
- The UK must continue to invest in soft power activities, or risk other countries taking over.
- English language is relevant across many departments and areas of policy, and should be considered as part of wider policy discussions

Discussion:

John Baron MP welcomed representatives of the English language sector and handed over to Andy McKay, Director Spain, British Council, for the context from the British Council.

The British Council has been present Europe for 80 years. It has 25 teaching centres in 11 countries and welcomes 89,000 students each year. The largest operations are in Spain, Italy, France and Portugal, with growing operations in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Greece and Slovakia. European stakeholders see it as an innovator and mark of quality.

In Europe, ‘English is seen as a skill’. Governments across the political spectrum include the English language in education policy. The British Council has influenced this. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the British Council was responsible for helping the development of English as a Foreign Language in the curriculum and training English language teachers of countries in Eastern Europe. It has played a long-term and continuing role in delivering direct language tuition to those in power (e.g. prime ministers, heads of state, diplomats, civil servants and influential people in European societies).

In 1940, the British Government posted Walter Starkey to Spain to focus on building educational and cultural relations between the UK and Spain at a time of political change and tension in Europe. Starkey set up the British Council School in Madrid, as well as starting to teach English language and offer British cultural programmes. This opened a window into the world, and access to UK institutions and British values, still spoken about today. The British Council has been welcomed in Spain for the past 80 years and Starkey’s mission still benefits the UK today, through vibrant commercial and social relations between Spain and the UK.

The demand for quality education continues to grow in Spain. Today, in Spain, the British Council has 11 teaching centres and 25,000 students. It delivers 80,000 UK qualifications each year, in partnership with UK awarding bodies. The number of Spanish students in UK higher education has grown by 7% to 12,000 and UCAS applications have increased. The British Council has seen the largest ever increase in applications to Spain (25%) from young British people applying to the Language Assistants Programme.

Since 2000, students of the British Council School, Madrid (aged 3 - 18 years old) follow a bilingual, bicultural curriculum. ‘Students leave as citizens of the world, but with a particular understanding and educational experience of both the UK and Spain: 35% of graduating students went to UK universities in 2018.



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The Madrid School provided the inspiration for a pioneer bilingual programme in state schools in socially disadvantaged areas which the British Council has run jointly with the Spanish Ministry of Education since 1996. This, in turn, has led to the development of individual bilingual programmes in all autonomous regions.

The British Council School in Madrid also provided a model for education which has led to the establishment of almost 150 independently owned and run schools across Spain which are teaching the British curriculum, bringing significant benefit to UK educators and providers.

Does the UK's English language sector strengthen and help maintain relationships with Europe? What role does it have in supporting UK soft power?

The role of accredited English language centres in the UK's soft power

John Baron MP highlighted the importance of English language following a visit to Kazakhstan, quoting UK university alumni as saying they “could not wait to return” to the UK. English language was cited as a reason for this attraction.

It was noted that accredited English language centres supply most English language provision on UK shores. This includes provision of young learner, intensive adult and university preparation courses. The economic value of the sector is estimated at £1.4 billion in export revenue annually.

Over 490,000 international students came to the UK to study English language in 2017. 58% came from the European Union, with Italy and Spain the leading two sending markets supplying 25% and 7% of all students. Students stay for an average of 3.7 weeks. 53% were under the age of 18.

English UK carried out research into the soft power of accredited English language provision in the UK. 80% of students polled said they wanted to return to the UK. Studying English in the UK, aged 13-14 can be a deciding factor in returning to the UK for higher education. European students are likely to return to the UK multiple times for study, travel and business as opposed to the second largest sending market, China, who often only visit again once for further study.

Poland is a very established market, with a peak from 2005 to 2011. There has been the growth in other Eastern European countries, but it is a question of affordability. The cost of short-term study overseas is simply out of the reach of some families. In addition, there has been substantial growth from outside the European Economic Area. There are 700,000 people in China who speak English, which brings opportunities for the UK, and highlights the real potential for the UK English language sector.



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Supporting diplomatic relations

The soft power of English language education in diplomatic relations is not always quantifiable but anecdotal. As an example, the British Council was present throughout the Cold War in Europe, setting up projects to train officials in the English language. This left a legacy and has benefited the UK in its diplomatic relations with Central and Eastern Europe and organisations such as the EU and NATO.

It was remarked that there is a great demand for English in state and policy reform. In countries which aspire to join the European Union (e.g. Georgia, Macedonia) English ability is seen to support applications. Francophone nations of Africa have historical connections to the French language but now want to use the English language to move forward. It is for this reason that we should recognise English as a tool for soft power and capitalise on that demand.

English language teachers and learners

Teachers influence hundreds of thousands of people in ways that can never be fully measured. The training of English language teachers has changed and developed over time. Before, it was usually UK based teachers who went overseas to teach, but now local teachers are teaching English themselves. Programmes such as Erasmus+ have enabled these local teachers to gain language skills and values from experience in the UK. The networks and mechanisms provided by such multilateral programmes enable easy sharing of knowledge and techniques, thus allowing the UK to remain at the forefront.

For over 50 years, IATEFL (the International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) has run an international conference attracting 3,000 English language teaching professionals to the UK. It is held in the UK by the popular demand of its members. Educators who speak English as a second or other language generally perceive the UK as leaders in English language education.

It was pointed out that English is now at the heart of education systems as a medium of instruction (EMI): courses are now being taught through English as opposed to local languages. There is an increased demand from education ministries for high level English teaching models which puts the UK in a good place to lead. Italy now makes it compulsory to teach at least one subject in English. Universities are also switching to this method in order to encourage international students to study with them. It was raised that research should be done into proving the effectiveness of this. It was also noted that this is a risk to framework and standards- this is a role that the UK can take on in order to protect and guide methodology and quality.

There is a growth in young learners as a market and English is more embedded into work around the world, meaning adults will also require higher English language skills.



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What does the sector see as the risks and opportunities for organisations, institutions and experts in a post-Brexit world?

It was agreed that the UK no longer “owns” the English language. Nowadays English is found in curricula worldwide and is used to enable students to become “global citizens”.

Technology is an important aspect of this and this needs to be considered more, in order for the UK to remain at the forefront of the sector. Continued funding for cultural exchange is integral to help the UK keep up to date with networks and knowledge. Suitable visas regulations will ensure that English language teachers can meet peak periods. It was commented that the UK is considering a new immigration policy which will give preference to skills as opposed to geography which could support the sector. It was noted that there is also a continued need to keep students out of net migration figures.

The sale of ELT books has been buoyant. In 2017 there was a 13% increase in sales of physical books worldwide to £272 million and specifically an 12% increase in exports to the European Union to £101 million. This compares to home physical book sales of £11 million. The publishing industry therefore has concerns about future legislation in two areas: customs and copyright. The industry relies upon the free movement of goods across customs borders, which is crucial to the industry’s continued success. It is also important that a strong copyright regime remains in place, with an exhaustion regime that protects against parallel imports.

Bilateral recognition of qualifications is a risk to professionals’ ability to work in other countries.

How does the UK compare to other countries’ efforts in English language education?

The UK can continue to assert its expertise in the English language sector, but research is required to ensure it is being done effectively. The Senate of Canada have commissioned a study on the influence of language teaching in soft power and cultural diplomacy. The UK needs to research and evidence this too. British Council has a bilateral language assistants programme with the Government of Quebec and a prominent Minister’s personal experience of UK education was a major influencer in the establishment of this partnership.

In terms of technology, there are benefits and risks from machine learning as well as machine testing techniques. There are hefty developments in this field which enable other governments to harness similar technology. In addition, in countries like China, said technology is produced much faster and more cheaply, meaning that the UK cannot keep up with the rate of production.

The UK’s competitors invest significantly more in soft power, which is a risk to the UK. It must not be left behind. In order to encourage the world to continue to engage with the English language together with UK values and culture, the Government must support the industry to



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contest that space. It was also agreed that continued and closer partnerships with international development and international trade departments is key.

Other countries often turn to the UK as a mark of excellence, especially from organisations such as Cambridge Assessment English. Prominent UK institutions and influencers were, together with European partners, integral in founding EAQUALS in 1991. EAQUALS is a European organisation that maintains standards of quality in language education (including English). It is a world authority on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – an international standard for showing levels of language ability. There is a strong body of research behind EAQUALS' work, to which UK English language providers have contributed.

The group called for continued and more dialogue with European stakeholders and the promotion of a wide range of language providers in bilateral communications between governments. It is important that Accreditation UK (a partnership between English UK and British Council) is considered within the visa and immigration regulations.

It was highlighted that the UK needs to collaborate within the sector as well as cooperate. In addition, research into the soft power of English was encouraged but it was noted that often in these cases, it cannot be measured until 10-20 years later. In addition, substantial staff and funds would be required to enable this kind of research.

It was noted that English language is relevant to many government departments and therefore crosses across various aspects of policy making. It was pointed out that a soft power network is required, and English language should be a part of that. Following this, the British Council and British Foreign Policy Group have already established a soft power group which includes representation from the English language sector and aims to bring together all soft power activities and organisation into one conversation – providing a strong international focus. It compliments and works in partnership with the Government-led Soft Power Strategy.