

Taylor Swift: my English teacher

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Sitting at a table in Florence's teeming Piazza Santo Spirito during the summer, we got chatting to an Italian waitress. She told us she was 25 and had never been to England or the US. She spoke exquisite English - not American - as fluently as the average Dutch taxi-driver.

When we asked how she learnt her English she said, 'I listen to Taylor Swift songs, sing aloud her lyrics from the screen, then practise on tourists like you.' All around us were folk from across the globe using English as the lingua franca.

That much of the rest of the world speaks English as their dominant second language is *the* greatest obstacle to UK children learning a modern foreign language. And which one should we choose to learn anyway? (Reflect also on the way we use the word 'foreign' in this context.)

The National Curriculum states laudably that 'learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures'. Yet over the past twenty years, MFL has been dealt a poor hand by different administrations without serious thought about long-term implications.

The beginning of the serious decline began in 2004 when the subject was declared no longer compulsory from age 14. The 2010 EBacc ambitions arrested the decline in a messy manner. Today the learning of a modern foreign language remains the province of a minority of 15 and 16 year-olds.

Working recently in the UAE in trilingual schools (French, English, Arabic), one glimpses the power for young people able to shift between different languages, and everything that comes with that facility in terms of social and cultural enrichment. Interestingly, a respected commentator in the region has recently observed that *written* Arabic throughout the Gulf is going the way Latin went, and that within a generation it will no longer be used.

My fear is that MFL teaching as we know it today in English schools is heading the same way. Look at the drop in A level numbers (German off a cliff since 2019), look at the significant fall in languages teachers wanting to train, look at most

pupils' (and parents') attitudes to MFL, look at the dominance of English across social media and the internet world-wide.

There are many excellent MFL departments I come across around the country, and diverse community tongues in some schools are studied engagingly. Yet in too many secondary schools, language teaching is in sad retreat. Target language is not used routinely, the joy of *une langue vivante* is missing from lessons, and students spend most of their time speaking English, a feature reinforced in the latest revisions to GCSE syllabuses. The picture in most primaries is no more encouraging, despite the best efforts of many.

Enterprising schools and multi-academy trusts are looking afresh at the challenge, rightly believing that to learn another language is the pre-requisite of being a thriving global citizen: bilingual early years provision; the harnessing of Duolingo; meaningful partnerships with schools abroad; after-school enrichment sessions; employing French, Chinese, Spanish, Italian nationals to lead the charge.

Can any of these initiatives be sustained and lead to a languages rejuvenation? Is there a narrow path to recovery? I have my doubts, short of a government legislating that 90-few per cent of pupils once again study a foreign language to 16. And in a post Brexit climate that seems a pipe-dream.

My sad prediction is that within 20 years we shall see more or less the end of MFL as a subject in state secondary schools. As with Latin, the learning of another world language will rest in grammar and independent schools. Only then shall we realise what we have lost, our insularity entrenched.

And the closing words from our waitress? 'I've just started teaching myself Portuguese as I want to move to Porto.'

Roy Blatchford's latest book is [The A - Z of Great Classrooms](#), published by John Catt.