

How many languages can you speak? British people are generally not very good language learners. In a recent survey, 62 per cent of the population only speak English!

If you're reading this, then you're probably studying English. Maybe you speak a couple of other languages too. What are the British like when it comes to learning languages?

Statistics

Brits are famous for not speaking foreign languages. According to a survey published by the European Commission, this bad reputation is totally justified. The results of the survey state that the British are officially the worst language learners in Europe! Let's look at some statistics:

- 62 per cent of people surveyed can't speak any other language apart from English.
- 38 per cent of Britons speak at least one foreign language, 18 per cent speak two and only 6 per cent of the population speak three or more.
- The European Union average showed that 56 per cent speak at least one foreign language, 28 per cent speak at least two and 11 per cent speak three or more. The survey confirmed that English was the most widely-spoken foreign language. 51 per cent of EU citizens can have a conversation in English.

School

Learning a foreign language is not a popular option at school in Britain. In UK schools it is common for children to start studying a foreign language at the age of 11 and many students give up languages completely at 14. So why don't young people continue with languages at school? Research suggests that students think that it is more difficult to get good grades in languages than in other subjects such as science or history. The British government is now looking at different ways to improve language learning at school. One idea is to start much younger; there are plans to introduce foreign languages from the age of five.

Which languages?

Another plan is to give school children more choice. The languages traditionally studied in British schools have been French, Spanish and German. Now the government is encouraging teachers to expand the range of languages taught to include Arabic, Mandarin Chinese and Urdu.

Mandarin is predicted to become the second most popular foreign language learned in UK schools. It is already studied by more children than German or Russian. Only French and Spanish are more popular. Gareth from Wales says 'I am learning Chinese, and find it fun'. Another student, Thomas from London, says 'Just telling people that I learn Mandarin impresses people. Even having a very basic level gives you an advantage'. Brighton College has become the first independent school to make Mandarin a compulsory foreign language. Its headmaster Richard Cairns said, 'One of my key tasks is to make sure pupils are equipped for the realities of the 21st century. One of those realities is that China has the fastest-growing economy in the world'.

It may be an ambitious task to change attitudes towards learning languages but the government is determined to try!