
Language barriers

WORKSHEET A

You already might have heard a joke that goes like this:

‘What do you call someone who speaks three languages?’

‘Trilingual?’

‘Correct. And what do you call someone who speaks two languages?’

‘Bilingual.’

‘Correct. And what do you call someone who speaks only one language?’

‘American.’

The punch line isn’t always the same: ‘British’ serves equally well, for example.

The reality behind the joke, of course, is that native speakers of English are generally not great at learning foreign languages. Because English is still the primary language of international communication, there tends to be an attitude among many native speakers that it is not important to learn another language.

Although more than a quarter of Americans *do* speak another language in addition to English (Spanish is by far the most common), fewer than half of American teenagers study a foreign language in school.

In schools in the United Kingdom the total number of teenagers who study a language other than English actually has been decreasing in recent years, mainly because since 2004 it has not been obligatory to study a foreign language after the age of 14. French is still the number-one foreign language in British schools, with Spanish having risen to second place ahead of German in third – but, shockingly, the proportion of 14 to 16-year-old pupils studying *any* of those three languages has fallen to less than 40%. Alarmed by such statistics, the British government now has plans to make it obligatory for all schoolchildren to start studying a foreign language at the age of five. In schools in both the US and the UK, there has been an expansion in ‘new’ foreign languages rather than the traditional European ones. Foremost among them, in recognition of China having become a major economic power, is Mandarin. The number of British pupils taking Mandarin classes, for example, has tripled in the last few years – but still represents less than 20% of the school population.

Language barriers

WORKSHEET B

Exercise 1

Answer the questions below.

1. After English, what language is most commonly spoken in the United States?
2. Which foreign language is most commonly taught in British schools?
3. According to the text, what is the main reason for the recent decrease in the number of British teenagers who study a foreign language at school?
4. What has contributed to the increased teaching of Mandarin in American and British schools?
5. The text contains a fact that suggests the joke at the start is a little unfair: what is it?
6. Would you agree that English is still 'the primary language of international communication'? Give reasons to support your answer.

Exercise 2

Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F), or if the text doesn't say (D).

1. More British school pupils learn Mandarin than German.
2. More British school pupils learn Spanish than German.
3. The British government doesn't seem worried by the situation regarding foreign languages in schools.
4. Fewer than 20% of Americans are trilingual.
5. Mandarin is an example of a traditional foreign language in American and British schools.
6. The second most common language in the United States is also the foreign language most commonly taught in British schools.
7. The number of British pupils studying Mandarin has tripled since 2004.
8. More than half of American teenagers study Spanish in school.
9. It is obligatory for British schoolchildren to study a foreign language from the age of five.
10. In British schools it is obligatory to study French from the age of 11 to 16.

Language barriers

WORKSHEET C

Exercise 3

The text from Worksheet A has been copied below, but now contains some mistakes. Twelve of the words in bold are incorrect, and four are correct. Decide which are incorrect, and correct them.

You already might have heard a joke that goes like this:

‘What do you call someone who speaks three languages?’

‘(1) **Threelingual**?’

‘Correct. And what do you call someone who speaks two languages?’

‘(2) **Bilingual**.’

‘Correct. And what do you call someone who speaks only one language?’

‘American.’

The (3) **munch** line isn’t always the same: ‘British’ (4) **serves** equally well, for example.

The (5) **real** behind the joke, of course, is that native speakers of English are generally not great at learning foreign languages. Because English is still the primary language of international communication, there (6) **bends** to be an (7) **attitude** among many native speakers that it is not important to learn another language.

Although more than a (8) **qwarter** of Americans *do* speak another language in addition to English (Spanish is by far the most common), fewer than half of American teenagers study a foreign language in school.

In schools in the United Kingdom the total number of teenagers who study a language other than English actually has been (9) **decreased** in recent years, mainly because since 2004 it has not been obligatory to study a foreign language after the age of 14. French is still the number-one foreign language in British schools, with Spanish having (10) **risen** to second place ahead of German in third – but, shockingly, the proportion of 14 to 16-year-old pupils studying *any* of those three languages has fallen to less than 40%. (11) **Alarmed** by such (12) **tastictists**, the British government now has plans to make it obligatory for all schoolchildren to start studying a foreign language at the age of five.

In schools in both the US and the UK, there has been an expansion in ‘new’ foreign languages rather than the traditional European ones. (13) **Fourmost** among them, in (14) **cognition** of China having become a major economic (15) **potent**, is Mandarin. The number of British pupils taking Mandarin classes, for example, has (16) **thirded** in the last few years – but still represents less than 20% of the school population.