



DOWNSIDE SCHOOL

Why Study Modern Languages

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There has been a great deal in the press of late about the alarming decline in the number of British school pupils studying modern foreign languages at GCSE and, even more so, at A level.

It is true to say that there has always been an underlying national apathy in Britain towards the learning of foreign languages, and we all recognise the stereotypical Englishman abroad speaking more and more loudly in the hope that shouting in English will somehow make him more comprehensible; some expats even take a perverse pride in refusing to speak the language of their host country. I was embarrassed during a stay in Spain recently, when some Spanish friends waved under my nose the copy of an English-language newspaper published in La Marina, just south of Alicante, in which there was an advertisement asking locals to join the 'We Refuse to Speak Spanish Club'.

At Downside School the vision is not as blinkered, and the tradition of learning modern foreign languages remains robust. We are lucky to be able still to offer three modern languages, French, German and Spanish, from beginners' level all the way up to university entrance level. We, as languages teachers, are also fortunate that our students very rarely question the point of learning languages, but that does not mean that it is not worth reminding them of the importance of languages every so often; indeed at our recent Careers Fair that very issue was addressed in a talk from the University of Bath.

It is fair to say that, in most other countries, the learning of English is given far higher priority in primary and secondary education programmes than MFL-teaching enjoys here in the UK, but the fact that other countries speak our language is not a reason not to learn theirs. Language-learning continues to open doors in almost every field of work, because being able to speak another language says something about you as a person: it says that you are culturally more aware; it says that you are likely to be more tolerant of diversity, with less prejudice towards those who are different; it says that you have improved communication skills, both in speaking and writing; it says that you have good analytical skills, as you would have been trained in grammar, as well as literature; it says that you have good critical thinking skills. And let's not forget that, crucially, studying a foreign language gives us a far better understanding and mastery of our native tongue.

Business and industries are increasingly looking for people with foreign language competence. Brexit, far from allowing us to become more linguistically insular, will see a rise in the demand for modern linguists, and, as has been widely stated in the press of late, we must make sure we can meet this demand.

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