

Investment in languages education could return double for UK economy

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A container ship. Credit: dendoktoor via Pixabay

An increase in secondary school pupils learning Arabic, Mandarin, French or Spanish could boost the UK economy by billions of pounds over 30 years, according to new research. The study warns that the ongoing decline in language learning in UK schools is undermining the country's ability to compete internationally.

A new study from the University of Cambridge and the not-for-profit

research institute RAND Europe shows that investing in languages [education](#) in the UK will return more than the investment cost, even under conservative assumptions.

By quantifying the wider [economic benefits](#) to the UK economy of extending languages education in schools, researchers found that the benefit-to-cost ratios for increasing Arabic, Mandarin, French or Spanish education are estimated to be at least 2:1, meaning that spending £1 could return about £2.

Researchers used a macroeconomic model to examine UK [economic performance](#) between now and 2050 if more pupils aged between 11 and 16—Key Stage 3 (KS3) and Key Stage 4 (KS4)—learned to speak one of four [different languages](#) so they could later use it effectively in business. The modeling was based on the Government's successful Mandarin Excellence Programme, in which extra hours are devoted to [language learning](#) without affecting other EBacc subjects, and lessons are fast-paced and engaging.

The analysis showed that a ten percentage point increase in UK pupils learning Arabic in KS3/KS4 could cumulatively increase UK GDP by between £11.8bn and £12.6bn over 30 years, compared against a baseline scenario in which the current levels of language provision in schools do not change. This corresponds to about 0.5% of the UK's GDP in 2019.

An increase in pupils learning Mandarin would increase GDP by between £11.5bn and £12.3bn. For French, the benefit is between £9.1bn and £9.5bn, and an increase in Spanish is estimated to be between £9.1bn and £9.7bn.

Wendy Ayres-Bennett, the study's lead author and Professor of French Philology and Linguistics at Cambridge said: "Languages play a

significant role in [international trade](#), and having a common language can, all else being equal, reduce trade barriers and foster trade. This study provides a new economic estimate for some of the UK's untapped language potential."

"However, the UK has experienced a sharp decline overall in the uptake of languages since 2004. At a time when the UK Government seeks to reset its global economic relationships, such a decline in language skills could impact on the UK's ability to compete on a global stage."

Researchers calculated the benefit-to-cost ratio by applying a range of education cost estimates per pupil per year for each of the four languages under consideration: £600 to £800 for Arabic; £480 to £720 for Mandarin; and £240 to £600 each for French and Spanish.

The resulting findings of a 2:1 benefit-to-cost ratio for each language demonstrated that there are identifiable returns for investing in languages education, not just in economic terms but also in producing workers with the language skills needed for the UK to compete internationally.

The report notes that while the UK does have a comparative advantage because of the global nature of English as a lingua franca, English is not the sole driver in certain key trade sectors such as mining and energy and services—and other languages matter equally, if not more, in reducing trade barriers.

UK exports are predicted to rise if there is an increase in the number of languages shared with its trading partners. The report shows that the removal of [language](#) barriers with trading partners in Arabic-, Chinese-, French- and Spanish-speaking countries could increase UK exports annually by about £19bn.

Marco Hafner, report co-author and senior economist at RAND Europe, said: "The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that investing in languages education could recoup its cost. But the idea behind the analysis was not in any way to substitute or diminish education in STEM or other EBacc subjects and replace them with languages. The intent is to demonstrate the value of improving the quality and quantity of languages education of secondary school pupils across the UK."

More information: The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages (2022). [DOI: 10.7249/RRA1814-1](https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA1814-1)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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