

British give up on French

With British pupils shunning French, even 'schoolboy' French may soon be a thing of the past - and UK students will lose out to their French counterparts in a global jobs market - Rebecca Lawn reports



However, the way languages are taught is an issue in both countries as students feel there is not enough focus on speaking. Responding to the findings, Rose, a student from Worcester who gained an A* at French GCSE, said: 'At the end of two years of study students can parrot back answers about why you shouldn't take drugs and what they did on their holidays, but in real life situations they are lost.' Briag, who has just started his final year of a BAC at a lycée in Paris, says that he can read English but has trouble speaking it. 'It's good that English is obligatory as a lot of jobs require it, but we don't get chance to talk in class,' he says. 'The teacher gives us texts to read and answer questions on.'

Brandt believes that English is taught in France in a way which is 'often boring and disconnected from reality' with a focus on 'perfect' English. 'This dis-

heartens students and keeps them from expressing themselves through fear of ridicule,' he adds. Frédérique, who got her BAC last year, says she was fortunate to have a native English teacher at school. 'She only spoke English to us which meant that we automatically learned more as we had to concentrate!' she says.

Faced with the decline in the UK, British education secretary Michael Gove has said that a broader system like the French one could be brought in - an 'English baccalaureate' awarded to pupils who gain five GCSEs including a language. A different approach to language-learning could also be the key.

'If we get young people at a much earlier age enjoying and being immersed in a language, with more emphasis on the spoken language, the downturn will begin to stop,' says Bill Alexander. **TFP**

Sarkozy 'bombed'

GOOGLE 'TROU DU CUL' and meet the French President. Sarkozy has become a 'google bombing' victim, with internet jokers using the Google search engine to make his official Facebook webpage the top result for anyone searching the French term for 'arsehole'.

In another online incident, the French Foreign Ministry had its tweet account hacked into so that it appeared to put out a tweet telling Romanians to "go f*** themselves" and went on to threaten the destruction of the European Union.

And Immigration Minister Eric Besson, 52, was forced to postpone his marriage to 24-year-old art student Yasmine Tordjman after internet plotters used Facebook to rally members of the public to disrupt the Besson nuptials.

Google bombing has, in the past, also linked former British prime minister Tony Blair's official website to the word 'liar' and former US president George Bush's site to 'miserable failure'.

One of the most famous Google bombs, of course, was when US webusers sent searchers for the phrase 'French military victories' to a site reading 'Google cannot find any French military victories, did you mean French military defeats?' **TFP**

The number of teenagers studying French at GCSE level has dropped by a staggering 45 percent in eight years and now French, for the first time, is no longer among the top ten most popular subjects. Just over one in five 16 year olds take an exam in French.

The structure of post-14 education, the belief that languages are 'difficult' and the pressure on state schools to perform well in league tables have all been cited as reasons for the decline. Unlike in France, where English is obligatory up to 18, foreign languages have not been compulsory at GCSE level since Labour changed the rules in 2004. And the coalition government has no plans to make them compulsory again.

'Once languages were made non-compulsory, they started to be squeezed from the curriculum for 14 to 16 year olds and there was a decline in young people opting for them,' says Bill Alexander, Director of Curriculum and Assessment at exam board AQA. 'That was a backwards step in terms of languages for the UK.'

'There is a widespread consensus, shared by employers, educationalists and politicians of all persuasions, that we are letting our young people down by allowing so many of them to opt out of language learning as early as 13 or 14,' agrees a spokesman for the National Centre for Languages in the UK.

As state schools are evaluated on exam results, many head teachers discourage their pupils from taking foreign languages as exam subjects, yet not

having a grasp of the language is likely to disadvantage state school pupils in particular: 'The majority of pupils from private schools - which invest enormously in foreign languages - go on to the best universities and obtain important professional positions yet they only account for seven percent of English pupils,' says Michel Monsauret, attaché for education at the French Embassy in London.

International companies increasingly look for bilingual staff and French students - who are obliged to learn English up to 18 - could have the upper hand over their British counterparts. 'Britain is making itself dependent on native speakers to whom it confides all external actions,' says Monsauret.

Culturally, too, students could miss out. 'Essentially, these students are being isolated from the reality of being a global citizen and being able to step in the shoes of another person,' says Susanna Zaraysky, author of Language is Music, who speaks seven languages.

In France, two foreign languages are compulsory, and students aged 15 to 18 must learn English as their first foreign language. 'If a young person doesn't speak English, they know that they're losing out on opportunities both in France and abroad,' says Eric Brandt, director of mycow.eu, a website for English-learners in France. 'Some years ago, English was only important for executives working abroad or with foreign companies, or for an intellectual purpose,' Brandt continues. 'But now it is different. English is necessary in many fields.'

Universities in France fall out of the top 200

There is bad news for France in the 2010-2011 table of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings as the country has just four institutions in the top 200. Experts compiling the rankings believe that a lack of large-scale elite research universities in France has once again hampered the country's performance.

The US, on the other hand, virtually dominates the tables, while the UK is in second place, Canada third, Germany fourth and Sweden fifth.

This year, 'history' and 'prestige' - which kept universities like Oxford and Cambridge well up the rankings - have been replaced by points for teaching and research facilities which probably

accounts for the US's high showing. US institutions occupy 72 places among the world's top 200 with the East Coast strongly represented and private institutions performing well.

There are just five British institutions in the top 50 and only 14 in the top 100, an indication, perhaps, that in previous years some universities have gained higher positions because of their heritage and reputation rather than academic excellence. The rankings are likely to be seen as a wake-up call for the UK's higher education sector. **TFP**

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'You're rubbish!' Do French schools destroy children's confidence?

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