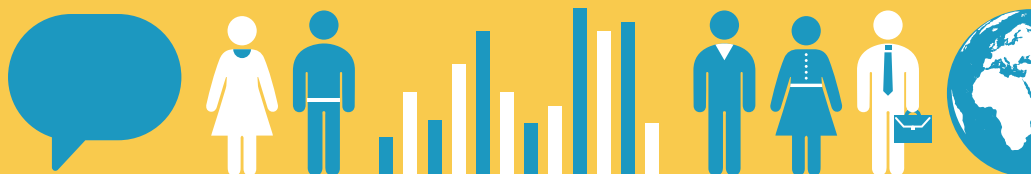


03

# INSPIRING THE FUTURE: LANGUAGES AT WORK SURVEY



Born Global is a British Academy project on language skills for employability, trade and business.

The British Academy set out to develop a deeper understanding of the language needs for employment, employer attitudes to languages and how language is used in the workplace for different purposes, by employees of different levels of skill and accountability.

We have produced an overview booklet on the Born Global project and the context in which it was undertaken. We have also produced a separate overview and summary of each data set.

This booklet deals with a survey of the Education and Employers Taskforce's *Inspiring the Future* network members, commissioned by the British Academy in October 2014.

## Introduction

In addition to employer attitudes and demand for language skills, the British Academy also set out to develop a greater understanding of how and where languages are used in the workplace in practice, as well as employees' views on languages and their perceptions of the benefit of language skills.

To do this it was necessary to speak to people in employment in the UK who had language skills and/or used languages at work. To achieve this, the British Academy commissioned the Education and Employers

Taskforce to carry out a survey of their *Inspiring the Future* network members. The network exists to connect schools and employers, and is made up of 16,000 individuals, 1,600 of whom say they use one or more foreign languages at work. The survey was sent to 1,300 of these multilingual users of whom 146 responded. The survey included an open question: 'is there anything else that you think it would be useful for us to understand about how you use languages in your job and the benefits this brings you and your organisation?' to which there were 75 answers.

The survey served three purposes:

- To explore how, at what frequency, at what level and for what purpose language was used in the workplace
- To develop further understanding of how individuals who have language skills perceive their value, any labour market advantage they associate with them and what they would recommend to future generations
- In addition to evidence from the SME languages survey, to develop a deeper understanding of the attitudes and behaviours towards languages of organisations and employers of different sizes and sectors who either use languages or have employees who have language skills

The analysis allowed for a comparison of native and non-native English speakers in the sample.

This document deals with the results of the *Languages at Work* survey. A more in depth look at 10 of the respondents is available in booklet *04 Inspiring the Future: Bringing Languages to Life*.

# Summary of key findings

## On employability benefits/labour market outcomes

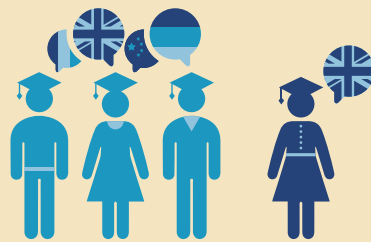
- 75% think that graduates with English-only are at a disadvantage in the labour market
- 60% agree that language skills gave them an advantage when applying for their current job; this is predominantly the case in very large organisations (68%)
- However, 44% think they would still have been offered the job they have without their language skills
- 71% think language skills have given them an edge over the course of their career; this applies more to non-native English speakers (80%) than native English speakers (68%)
- 67% think they have been able to apply for a wider range of jobs thanks to their language skills; once again this applies more to non-native English speakers (77.5%) than native speakers (60%)

**'It is the employees with additional languages that get the best career development opportunities when we expand internationally.'**

*Reward Manager, Technology Sector*

- Examples from the free-form narratives suggest that language skills give an advantage at recruitment, in global/export oriented enterprises at least, offering a wider range of opportunities and faster career progression:

'I work for a multinational organisation which employs talented people globally. The global market is filled with candidates who speak English AND another language and as monolinguals



**75% THINK THAT GRADUATES WITH ENGLISH-ONLY ARE AT A DISADVANTAGE IN THE LABOUR MARKET**

most British candidates begin at a disadvantage. Global companies with global customers and clients will always prefer those who speak more than 1 language.'

*Senior Manager, Goldman Sachs*

'It is the employees with additional languages that get the best career development opportunities when we expand internationally.'

*Reward Manager, Technology Sector*

## At an organisational level...

- 58% perceive that their organisation actively recruits employees with language skills but that this is not an essential requirement; this is predominantly the case in very large organisations (70%). Micro-organisations (0–9 employees) are the least likely to hold this view (27%)
- 46% say their organisation hires in language specialists to meet their needs; this is predominantly the case in medium sized enterprises (70%)

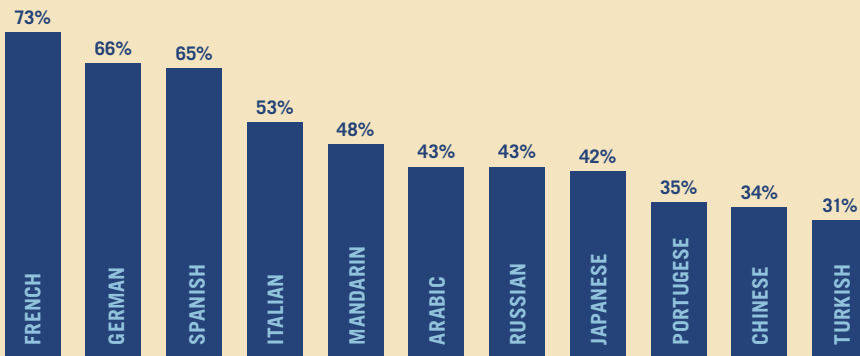
- In terms of their organisation's investment in language training, the picture is mixed: 43% feel their organisation does not invest in language training whilst 38% report that they do

## How, when, where and at what level they are used

- Respondents were asked both about their own language use and that of their organisations:
  - The most commonly reported languages at an organisational level were French (73%), German (66%) and Spanish (65%), followed by Italian (53%), Mandarin (48%) Arabic and Russian (43%) and Japanese (42%). Around a third cited Portuguese (35%), Cantonese (34%) and Turkish (31%)
  - French, German, Spanish and Italian were also the most commonly used by respondents themselves
  - Respondents reported mixed levels of proficiency. French and Spanish had high levels of proficient users, whilst Italian, Japanese, Russian and Portuguese
- users were predominantly at a basic level. German users reported roughly equal levels of basic, intermediate and proficient use
- Relatively few respondents reported using their languages regularly, with the majority reporting to use them occasionally or rarely
- 22% do not use languages at work at all; with 29% of native speakers of English compared to just 5% of non-native speakers
- Where languages are used they are predominantly used both internally and externally
- The free-form narratives show that although most respondents do not use language skills themselves on a daily basis, they credit languages with providing them with other key skills used on a regular basis:
 

'It always brings a competitive edge, helps with idea association and analytical thinking and overall allows for greater level of culture.'

*Senior Manager, Bank of America*



**MOST COMMONLY REPORTED LANGUAGES AT AN ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL**

'It is not just the languages themselves but understanding the culture of another country that is equally vital in achieving success at work.'

*Freelance HR Consultant*

'...gives a person a wider/more global view and flexibility in dealing with people.'

*Senior Manager, Ernst Young*

'Languages are not just about communicating – by learning a language, you learn about the culture, history and behaviours relevant to that language which enables the development of deeper interpersonal relationships and knowledge of the country. It broadens your mind and makes you more open to different ways of thinking.'

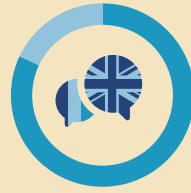
*Senior Manager, Travel Company*

**'It always brings a competitive edge, helps with idea association and analytical thinking and overall allows for greater level of culture.'**

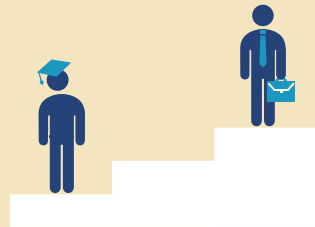
*Senior Manager, Bank of America*

## On education

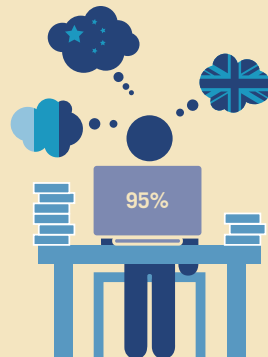
- 82% think languages are as important as STEM subjects
- 75% think graduates who speak only English are at a disadvantage in the job market
- 70% think school and college leavers are at a disadvantage in the job market
- 95% think speaking a language other than English at home will be very useful to young people in the job market
- Around half think young people do not understand the benefits of language skills in their sector
- 51% would advise young people to study a joint honours degree with a language to get into their line of work; only 2% would recommend a single honours language degree



**82% THINK LANGUAGES ARE AS IMPORTANT AS STEM SUBJECTS.**



**70% THINK SCHOOL AND COLLEGE LEAVERS ARE AT A DISADVANTAGE IN THE JOB MARKET.**



**95% THINK SPEAKING A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH AT HOME WILL BE VERY USEFUL TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE JOB MARKET.**

- One third would recommend studying languages through other routes such as a year abroad, evening classes or self-study

## Organisational/sector considerations

- In terms of which languages would be helpful for business in future, 50% said Mandarin
- Arabic, Russian and Spanish were also cited
- 60% think their organisation has sufficient language capacity; only 22% do not
- However, more than three quarters also felt that better language skills could help build new client relationships and strengthen existing ones

# About the data set

The survey achieved an 11.2% return (146 respondents).

## Characteristics of the sample

- Self-selecting; not nationally representative
- Type: 66% work for multinationals; 34% work for UK-only enterprises
- Size: micro (1–9 employees) 18%; small (10–49) employees 9%; medium (50–249 employees) 5%; large (250–1,999 employees) 12%; very large (2,000+) 56%
- Sector: extremely varied with the largest being: Financial/Insurance/Banking 18%; Education/Training 13%; and Legal/Political Services 9%
- 72% report English as a native language; 28% are non-native English speakers

## Methodology

The *Languages at Work* survey was distributed online, and data were collected during a two-week period in October 2014.

The British Academy, established by Royal Charter in 1902, champions and supports the humanities and social sciences across the UK and internationally. It aims to inspire, recognise and support excellence and high achievement across the UK and internationally. As a Fellowship of over 900 UK humanities scholars and social scientists, elected for their distinction in research, the Academy is an independent and self-governing organisation, in receipt of public funding. Views expressed in this report are not necessarily shared by each individual Fellow, but are commended as contributing to public debate.

In 2011, the British Academy launched a new programme, with funding from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, targeting deficits in languages and quantitative skills. The programme of work reflects the Academy's longstanding concerns about deficits in these areas of the humanities and social sciences, as well as in UK education and research. Through the programme, the Academy funds research and relevant initiatives, and seeks to influence policy in these areas.

THE BRITISH ACADEMY  
10–11 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AH  
+44 (0)20 7969 5200

Registered Charity: Number 233176

[britishacademy.ac.uk](http://britishacademy.ac.uk)

 @britac\_news

 TheBritishAcademy

 britacfilm



*for the humanities and social sciences*