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Lazy monolinguals will hurt your business: The compelling case for bringing language learning into the workplace

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Over 70 per cent of UK exporters have no foreign language ability (Source: Getty)

The UK'S future relationship with Europe is far from certain. With many of Brexit's economic consequences still panning out, it is a good time to reflect on how the UK can maintain a global trading edge after its exit from the EU.

In this respect, post-Brexit UK companies would do well to embrace foreign languages as a matter of urgency in order to cement the creation of effective cultural and business relationships with prospective EU and non-EU trading partners.

While English is undoubtedly one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and largely used as the lingua franca in corporate diplomacy, I believe that a lack of intercultural and language competence on the UK's part could jeopardise the future global standing and prosperity of its businesses.

As former German Chancellor Willy Brandt put it over 40 years ago: “if I am selling to you, I speak your language. If I am buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen”. Indeed, multilingual businesses are proven to benefit from richer interactions between partners, employees, suppliers and customers as well as increased sales and return on investment. It also offers a significant edge on the competition by enabling a wider customer and client base.

As an example, our business is focused on customer service and education of clients, and a rich language pool has enabled us to move easily into new territories, gain local knowledge, and provide round-the-clock customer help without the need to spend huge amounts of time translating or battering down the language barrier.

Out in the cold

Britain needs to be investing in upskilling communications among its workforce. Yet as it stands, we still have an alarming shortage of linguistic finesse – and it costs. According to a recent YouGov poll by the British Council, over 75 per cent of the British public cannot speak what are regarded as the “10 most important languages” well enough to hold a conversation, while 1 per cent or less can speak Arabic, Mandarin, Russian or Turkish.

These deficient language skills and the presumption that international business partners or customers will speak English is costing the UK economy about 3.5 per cent of GDP, according to research from the Department of Business.

Over 70 per cent of exporters currently have no foreign language ability in the countries in which they operate and 62 per cent of non-exporting businesses who are searching for international opportunities claim that a lack of language skills is acting as a barrier to the global success of their business.

In a poll conducted by language trainer Rosetta Stone, 87 per cent identified more than one critical language in use by their organisation and two thirds expressed dissatisfaction with the current linguistic skills of their employees.

Unless something is done to amend this issue, Britain may lose a valuable opportunity to open up its trade to the globe and the rhetoric of Britain being viewed as an unconnected island may ring true.

There is a fairly straightforward change that could be made: systematic linguistic training in business schools, education and through employee up-skills initiatives. Companies that do not have a multilingual workforce should perhaps, for instance, consider improving languages in the same way they would with IT and first aid.

What is essential is that business leaders are prepared to be flexible and adapt to the changing circumstances after Brexit. The UK has plenty going in its favour and

is a highly attractive location for businesses but the engagement of firms in linguistic training is likely to be essential if the UK is to expand its global reach in coming years.