

The Importance of Languages in Global Context: An International Call to Action

JOINT STATEMENT

British Academy
American Academy of Arts and Sciences
Australian Academy of the Humanities
Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
The Royal Society of Canada



AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES



We are at an extraordinary moment in human history. Cooperation within and across borders is vital as we work to solve global challenges. Clear and precise communication is more crucial than ever before to the health and security of every nation.

As global businesses, diplomatic corps, and other leaders have repeatedly stated, language education, and the accompanying linguistic and intercultural competencies, are a necessity for social, political and economic development, and for effective collaboration. During a global health crisis, researchers, governments, and health care workers must be able to share accurate information. In such times, language matters, and fluency in our languages matters. The people of the world must be able to speak to each other and be understood—to communicate as effectively and as rapidly as technology allows.

The COVID-19 pandemic is just the latest indication that societies and institutions need to develop language policies that are explicit, coordinated and comprehensive, making access to all of the world's languages a core feature and indispensable part of the education of every student, of every age, beginning with the language(s) learned at home.

The challenge of providing education in multiple languages has proven especially complicated in primarily Anglophone nations, and even in countries whose English-speakers are co-citizens with important populations speaking other languages. Today, Anglophone communities in particular are not producing enough speakers of languages other than English to meet 21st-century needs, arguing that multilingualism is too difficult to achieve, or that English should be treated as a lingua franca. Nor are these communities sufficiently focused on what is needed for the preservation, maintenance, and invigoration of the other linguistic communities with whom they live.

To help reverse this trend, the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences have issued complementary reports promoting the importance of languages in addition to English, within both education and wider society. They are now joined by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and the Royal Society of Canada in this joint statement of shared principles for the future of language education. Although our countries have different linguistic communities and official languages, our academies stand together in recognizing a common challenge and the shared need to support the enhancement of language education in schools, colleges and universities, and the workplace around the following three goals:



HOLD

English in particular is the most commonly taught language in the world by a factor of twenty. It is spoken in at least 101 countries and is a critical component of commercial and diplomatic leadership. It is an official language of the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court, and NATO. Providing all of our citizens full access to literate English must therefore continue to be an educational priority. At the same time, a growing body of research identifies multilingualism as the natural human condition, affirming that full access to spoken and written English is compatible with mastery of other languages, and is even enhanced by the awareness brought by knowledge of other tongues.

CELEBRATE

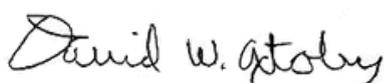
Languages are vital resources to be cherished and nurtured, including the languages of minority and indigenous populations who should be supported in their efforts to transmit their languages across generations, safeguard their traditional knowledge systems, and be protected from discrimination on the basis of language. This support should include the preservation and further development of cultural materials as well as continuing access to education across a range of languages. Such efforts are critical to creating truly multilingual societies as well as necessary to meaningful cross-cultural communication.

GAIN

Language skills foster literacy, educational attainment, and a confident mindset that views cultural difference with curiosity rather than prejudice. They enhance employability, enabling people to navigate multicultural environments and to be sensitive to cultural difference and better at conceiving events from multiple points of view. They encourage us to be flexible, adaptable, and globally mobile, whether as citizens or as researchers working in pursuit of new knowledge that cannot be bounded by geography. Students from every socioeconomic background must have equal access to language education to reach their full potential in the 21st century.

We live in a world in which increasing economic disparities and rising environmental threats have been causing massive migrations and political factionalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified global communications—virtual meetings, streaming cultural content, international news, social media, and so on—but also risks increasing inequalities and heightening racism as well as regional tensions. To solve the problems we face, we must increase our capacity to speak with each other as part of a global community. Language instruction to enhance literacy and fluency, including knowledge of multiple languages, is crucial to creating future ‘global citizens’ who can respond to these challenges and support positive impacts on our own domestic politics.

A renewed commitment to multilingualism within society, and to languages within education, is critical to preparing present and future generations of citizens who will be responsible for building international collaborations and fostering harmony at home. We call for governments, policy makers, and educators, alongside business, industry, and others, to take concerted, systematic and coordinated action to widen capacity for, and promote the opportunities of, widely accessible education in a broad range of languages.



David W. Oxtoby
President
American Academy of Arts & Sciences



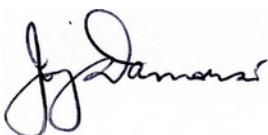
Professor Sir David Cannadine PBA
President
British Academy



Jeremy McNeil CM, FRSC
President, Royal Society of Canada



Professor Jane Hall FASSA, FAHMS
President
Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia



Professor Joy Damousi FASSA, FAHA
President
Australian Academy of the Humanities

Related reading:

American Academy of Arts & Sciences:

- 'America's Languages: Investing In Language Education for the 21st Century'

British Academy:

- 'Languages in the UK: a call for action'
- 'Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills'