

2001 marked the European Year of Languages, with events taking place to celebrate the linguistic diversity of all the countries in the European Union. **Nick Byrne** reflects on language learning and its importance at LSE.

Does anyone here speak **global English**?

Having a European Year of Languages definitely did not mean a year of European languages. Rather, events and discussions focused on the linguistic diversity of Europe. This went beyond Germanic and Romance linguistic boundaries, not only to celebrate French, German and Spanish but also to celebrate less widely-spoken languages such as Catalan and Welsh, as well as newly-adopted community languages.

The year had at its heart the importance of language not just as a communicative tool, but also as an expression and reflection of each citizen's identity, heritage and culture. This year celebrated the role of English – rightly so, as this particularly idiosyncratic language is possibly the biggest success story in the history of languages.

The European Year of Languages stressed, however, the importance of each language, and wagged a cautious finger at the dangers of the increasingly dominant role of English. At a conference in Brighton, chaired by Will Hutton (former editor of *The Observer*, now chief executive of the Industrial Society and an LSE governor), the question of the dominant role of English as a global language was addressed. People expressed fears at the diminishing role of other Indo-European languages such as German, Russian and Spanish and also the direct effect of English on Chinese, despite its 600 million speakers.

One clear thing emerges from the findings of the conference and previous British Council reports. It is that English no longer belongs to the English. More non-native speakers now speak English than native speakers alone. Global English is a reality, and as such neither the British, nor the Americans, have a monopoly on how this new globalised brand of English



develops. Indeed, this can be seen as a justifiable trade-off. Non-English speakers give up the battle and accept English as the dominant language, while English speakers relinquish linguistic imperialism and donate their language to the world. To continue the theme, such terms as 'Global English' and 'ELF: English as a Lingua Franca' could become distinct possibilities, and could be offered in the majority of international language schools as a more workable alternative to the parochial options of British or American English. Esperanto suddenly develops a nostalgic appeal to the hidden foreign linguist within us all.

Yet, there is a paradoxical development to the unstoppable growth in global English. It is the growing awareness of the cultural importance of one's own language, and the need of finding new roles for one's language and defining the realities of its functions. German is not going to wither and die, no more than French, Dutch, Danish or Japanese. English may be the

common denominator in the globalised worlds of economics, business and governments but there is a big difference between using English as a second language and giving up on one's own. And while it is true to say that the over-exposure of English in the media has affected all other languages, new linguistic imports are vital to the upkeep of any language's vocabulary, and will continue to happen, despite the artificial protestations of such institutions as the Académie Française.

So, given these developments, why bother with a language centre at LSE? Since most of the 60 per cent of the international cohort of students are fluent in at least two languages, and generally proficient in another one, and since English is the global language, and that takes the other 40 per cent of the student population into account, why have a language centre at all?

Perhaps surprisingly, over 100 students at the School are taking a degree option in a foreign language, and over 1,500 are learning or



Nick Byrne



'More non-native speakers now speak English than native speakers alone'

improving a foreign language as an extra-curricular activity. About half of these students have English as their first language. It is interesting to note that IWLPs (Institution Wide Language Programmes) have been the big success story of the 1990s. The number of A level language students may be dropping but the number of students learning a language anew, or continuing where they left off at school, has rocketed. Sadly departments or faculties of languages have been reduced in UK universities, owing to the downturn in the number of students taking single and joint honours in languages, but the growth of language centres has somewhat compensated. Students at LSE and also across the UK realise that being and acting globally means being able to operate in more than one language. Relying solely on English – even global English – results in a self-imposed paradoxical linguistic, social and cultural isolation. Global English is an initial means of communication not an end in itself. If global English helps open initial doors, an over-reliance on it will ensure that further doors remain shut.

'Mainland' European countries are already working on procedures, which will give preference to people who speak three languages competently. Those who have only English will find themselves disadvantaged in both the European and global marketplace. Many UK students have seen the light, and it is a red warning light, against the dangers of the type of linguistic complacency so dear to the heart of little Englanders around the world. Going global means thinking internationally, and being truly international means learning and speaking other languages. ■

Nick Byrne

is director of the LSE Language Centre.

The life and times of the Language Centre

In spring this year, the Language Centre received rave reports, not only from the internal auditing bodies of LSE but also from external agencies, including the Quality Assurance Agency. All of them praised the teaching and innovation of the centre. This year also saw the creation of the Language Showroom in the Clare Market building.

The last two and a half years have seen a tremendous period of growth. Nearly 150 students are following a degree option in French, German, Russian, Spanish language and society, or English literature and society. Over 1,500 students are learning or improving a foreign language as an extra-curricular activity, and students can choose between the above languages or Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Japanese or Portuguese.

It is not just LSE students who are benefiting from the centre. Over the last two years business clients have included the British Council, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Pixelpark – part of the Bertelsman Group.

The other key area is English for Academic Purposes. About 1,000 students take advantage of a varied programme of in-session language support, and up to 200 take part in their growing pre-session

and language foundation programmes. Said Nick Byrne: 'Before we started our own one-year language foundation programmes, prospective LSE students were going to King's or UCL. LSE was losing out on income, and students were losing out on the specialist subject-specific language tuition, which we are best equipped to give.'

In June Nick was awarded a £50,000 National Teaching Fellowship – one of only 20 awarded by the Institute of Learning and Teaching – for his project *Communitec*. He said: 'We are using the money to ensure our staff are up to speed in new technologies. We don't want to fall into the trap of having first-class equipment but not the time or the money to train staff how to use it effectively.'

In August three LSE students, Niall Williams, Stuti Sood and Nicole Foster, taking degree options in French, German and Spanish, won the European Year of Languages essay competition, tying for first place with the University of Bristol.

Finally, in October, as part of European Year celebrations, the Language Centre hosted a round-table discussion on Languages and Citizenship. The panel comprised guest speakers from LSE, King's College, London, Dublin City University and a representative, Eva Blasser, from EUROLANG, the official press agency for less widely spoken European languages.

Tel: + 44 (0)20 7955 7933
Email: languages@lse.ac.uk
Web: www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/language

NOTE: LSE alumni are entitled to use the Language Centre at the same rates as LSE students. Please visit our website for further details.