

Opinion [Brexit](#)

Five languages Brexit Britons should learn

Which are the most useful for work and trade?

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In a report on the most useful languages for Brits, the British Council ranked Dutch in seventh place. The Netherlands is the UK's third-biggest non-English speaking market © AP

3 HOURS AGO Michael Skapinker

On trips to [the Netherlands](#), I always ponder how long it would take me, a competent Afrikaans speaker, to learn Dutch. Not long, I think, but it would probably be fruitless. English is widely and fluently spoken in the Netherlands; I imagine my initial halting Dutch would be met with amusement.

So I was surprised to see that a [recent British Council report](#) of the top 10 languages young Britons should learn put Dutch in seventh place. The top-10 table was based on a study of the UK's export and tourism markets, emerging high-growth economies, diplomatic and security priorities and job and educational opportunities.

The Netherlands, the report points out, is the UK's third-biggest non-English speaking market after Germany and France. The British Council concedes that much of this is due to the "Rotterdam effect" — the Dutch port is the initial destination of much UK export traffic bound for third countries.

But a survey of job opportunities open to Brits found that Dutch was the sixth most sought-after language, with demand for it in customer services, information technology, sales, finance and marketing. [Amsterdam is to be the new home of the European Medicines Agency](#). So learning Dutch is perhaps not such a stupid idea.

The British Council survey attempts to address a [looming post-Brexit problem](#). An end to EU freedom of movement may mean UK companies losing easy access to the Italians, Spaniards and Germans and many others who helped staff their European sales and marketing departments, not to mention many other parts of their businesses.

And while English is now the world's lingua franca, poor UK foreign language skills risk damaging the country's future, the British Council says. It is not just that much direct-to-consumer business still has to be done in the customer's language. It is also that being a monoglot blinds you to the rest of the world's richness and complexity.

Britons are going to have to become more culturally adept as the UK tries to establish new trading relationships, and keep up its existing ones.

Top 10 languages for Brexit Britons

- 1 Spanish
- 2 Mandarin
- 3 French
- 4 Arabic
- 5 German

That the UK's language skills are dire is beyond dispute. Studies show that [little more than a third](#) of the population can manage a basic conversation in another language, and that includes immigrants who have a language other than English already.

The British Council's report commends the UK's efforts to begin foreign language learning in primary schools, but concedes that English speakers do have a particular problem. While the rest of the world knows

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| 6 Italian | it has to learn English, it is hard for anglophones to |
| 7 Dutch | decide which language would be best. |
| 8 Portuguese | Hence this study, which follows a similar one in 2013. |
| 9 Japanese | Since then, the deteriorating economics and politics |
| 10 Russian | of Russia and Brazil mean that Russian and |
| | Portuguese have slipped down the table, which is a |
| | problem for aspiring language learners. Dropping |
| | Russian to take up Dutch is not like selling shares in |

GE and investing in Apple. Learning a language is tough. It is a lifetime's work. Once you have devoted years to one, you do not want to hear that you should have learnt another.

Are there any languages that you can count on remaining important? The report says that the top five — Spanish, Mandarin, French, Arabic and German — were the top five in 2013 too.

There are impressive Mandarin programmes in English and Scottish schools. But [Mandarin is hard](#) for English speakers, and students of Arabic have to decide which spoken version to learn. As English has both Germanic and romance-language roots, young Brits are more likely to make progress with the three European languages, although German, as anyone who has tried to learn it knows, is no picnic.

I threw myself into French many years ago, but today would choose Spanish. It is not that French is not an international language — my teachers over the years have included a Belgian-Lebanese, a Tunisian and a Sephardi Jewish Congolese. But Spanish is the language of much of Latin America, and the second language of the US.

Even better, if you try to speak Spanish in Spain, you are likely to get an answer in Spanish rather than English. Spain is, in my experience, the only country in Europe where business events do not automatically take place in English. You have a higher chance of getting conversation practice than you would in France or Germany, or the Netherlands.

While mastering any language is an excellent idea, and any of the top five would be great, Spanish deserves its place at the top of the table.

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