

Just speaking English is not enough in the world we live in

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An index of world-wide language skills shows that the very highest levels of proficiency in English as a foreign language are found in Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Poland and Austria, in that order.

The nations outside Europe with the highest levels of English proficiency are Malaysia, Singapore, the Dominican Republic and South Korea. The lowest levels in Europe (although we don't have information for many of the Balkan countries) are, starting from the bottom, Ukraine, Russia, France, Italy, Slovakia, Portugal and Spain.

The low position of France is rather remarkable. Although they're just across the Channel from us, the French are lower on the index than Hungary, Romania, Latvia – and Argentina. Maybe this is because there's a tradition in France of resisting English as the language of American imperialism, which of course it is; but it is also the language of international communication, and even French people are at a disadvantage without it.

Talking of disadvantages, where would the British come on any world-wide index of foreign language proficiency? Pretty



■ A high proportion of people in the Netherlands speak English so well they can use it fluently in their working lives.

Picture: PA/RENATO GRANIERI

low, is my guess. Too many people here have the wrong attitude to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Fewer pupils now study languages at school; language qualifications are no longer a requirement for university entrance; and, in a spate of academic vandalism, universities are closing down language departments.

Some people think that's OK: why should young British people bother to learn other languages when everywhere else in the world there is such a strong emphasis on developing a very good command of English?

A high proportion of people in Denmark, Holland, Sweden and elsewhere speak English so well that, if necessary, they can use it fluently in their working lives, and

with clarity and accuracy. Very many educated Swiss people speak Swiss German, Standard German, English and French, and then apologise for their bad Italian. And we are not just talking about academics and top professionals – think of all those eloquent Dutch and Scandinavian footballers you can hear doing post-match interviews on TV.

So the real question that we should be asking is: why would an international business employ a young monolingual British speaker when they could engage a bilingual (or trilingual or quadrilingual) Dutch, Austrian, Swiss, or South Korean person? By thinking that "English is enough", we are putting our country and our young people at a disadvantage. The truth is that English is not enough.