



Speaking English won't get us very far

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of schools with new tools and better methods for improving the language skills of the next generation, but also to demonstrate the value of languages to key issues of our time.

Prof Wendy Ayres-Bennett *University of Cambridge*, **Prof Janice Carruthers** *Queen's University Belfast*, **Prof Charles Forsdick** *University of Liverpool*, **Prof Stephen Hutchings** *University of Manchester*, **Prof Katrin Kohl** *University of Oxford*

● There are different ways to get up a hill: walking up, practising navigation, exploring the landscape, getting exercise; or choosing a cable car and taking a selfie on the top. Likewise, education can be a path of exploration, in which not only the final result counts but everything learned on the way. Or it can be an exam selfie, "been there, done it".

Simon Jenkins criticises the current trend to reduce education to league tables, replacing the path of learning experience through a screenshot of exam results. But his argument against learning foreign languages attacks precisely what he is defending. He extols "speaking, listening, debating", "guiding pupils through the human drama of literature", "revelling in culture". Well, that's exactly what language learning is about: a path of exploration through the landscapes of history and culture, science and technology, politics and

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 Language learning is also a mental exercise that delays cognitive ageing and dementia, and leads to a better recovery from stroke
Dr Thomas H Bak

economics. It makes you understand people, their way of thinking and doing things. It is also a mental exercise, which improves attention and understanding of other points of view, delays cognitive ageing and dementia, and leads to a better recovery from stroke. It is an example of learning for life rather than just for exams. If all you want from Germany is a selfie in front of the Brandenburg Gate, you won't need any German. But to understand German history, culture and people, do business with them and learn from them, you'll be better off learning at least a bit of their language.

Dr Thomas H Bak
Reader in human cognitive neuroscience, University of Edinburgh

● I find it odd that Anne McElvoy takes exception to the attainment of top marks in A-level languages by native speakers of the languages in question (Any future exam overhaul will need a lot of explaining, 25 August). Would she prevent English native speakers being awarded top marks in English in order to create a level playing field for mother-tongue speakers of other languages taking that subject?
David Head
Peterborough

● It's not true that languages are only taught because "they are easy to test, quantify and regiment". In fact, they're very hard to test fairly, as Ofqual and the DfE have recently accepted. There's a much better reason for teaching them: that they're really interesting and mind-opening, and appeal to the same mental faculties as maths. (That's becoming increasingly clear from the rise and rise of the UK Linguistics Olympiad - see www.uklo.org.)

Richard Hudson *Emeritus professor of linguistics, UCL*, **Dr Louise Courtney** *Reading University*, **Dr Marcello Giovanelli** *Aston University*, and four others
 Full list and more on language learning at gu.com/letters

Corrections and clarifications



● A feature on the Something True podcast highlighted an episode that recalled what could be history's greatest prank, carried out by Virginia Woolf. For any readers left wondering, the accompanying picture of Vita Sackville-West captioned as "Prankster ... Virginia Woolf" was not part of the prank, it was selected in error (Pod complex, 25 August, page 24, G2).

● A rogue "Lake" was added to Windermere during the editing process of an article about the all-England stone skipping championships. As our style guide says, it is Windermere, not Lake Windermere. Bassenthwaite Lake is the only official lake in the Lake District: all the rest are waters or meres (Woman makes waves in stone skipping's boys' club, 19 August, page 13).

● We referred to men who dressed up as nurses to raise money for an NHS trust as "Lundy fundraisers". That should have said Ludlow fundraisers (Health warning, 24 August, page 5, G2).



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Wellbeing tossed aside in favour of elitism

Last Thursday my clever 16-year-old daughter Rachel should have been getting her GCSE results. A picture taken at her school happens to illustrate one of your articles online; I recognise the children. But Rachel is not there.

Your coverage of the new GCSEs has rightly highlighted the error of focusing again on the brightest, most academic children, while doing a disservice to all of us by neglecting those who can excel at vocational qualifications. But only one of your articles ('We were guinea pigs, but it was OK', 24 August) talked about the extra stress and higher expectations created by the exams. The toll exacted on my family was extreme: Rachel took her own life in January, with school stress a major contributory factor. Her story is at antidepaware.co.uk/losing-rachel

As a nation we are facing a crisis in teenage mental health. At the same time, teachers are struggling with their own stress, the spectre of the league tables ever-present.

Your editorial (25 August) says that, although misprioritised, "the reforms are

benefits of a city uniform

end an average of £329 uniform each year (nt, Family, 26 August). research by Oxford that showed the aver-ol outfit in 2015 cost kit. Even allowing for t that children will of some items, the ems unlikely, espe-nsider that the most blazer, will typically e year. The real ques- one of cost but of uniform lasts longer value in the long run



School's out for summer

'It's been hot in Manchester the last couple of days! I took this photo of a girl dancing in the newly reopened fountains in Piccadilly Gardens'

Photograph: Sushil Nash/
 GuardianWitness