

Language learning will help boost UK economy

The UK needs to think globally and reach new markets if it is to trade its way out of recession, says a leading business expert. “If we are to see stronger economic growth, we have to think beyond traditional markets in English-speaking countries and the EU,” says Adam Marshall, Director of Policy and External Affairs at the British Chambers of Commerce, quoted in the next issue of Languages Today magazine, out next month.

And he’s not the only one. Earlier this month, David Cameron announced a host of new measures to boost the UK economy, strengthen the competitiveness of the UK economy and unlock global trade. In a letter to President Sarkozy, leader of this year’s G20 summit, the Prime Minister stated, “international trade can be the engine of global growth and development, and we must keep it moving forwards”.

Although the UK consumer may be reluctant to spend, emerging boom economies outside Europe have lots of potential for British businesses. At a recent conference of CBI delegates, a manager of a printing company emphasised that, “when you look around the globe, the sky is not falling in. There are loads of opportunities. It’s a question of whether you can exploit them”. The same arguments are currently being made in the USA.

But how can this be done? Adam Marshall questions whether Britain has the language capabilities to be able to exploit these markets. “We are not always equipped with the right skills to trade with other countries. So many emerging markets are rising up the agenda... our companies will need additional language skills if they are to import and export their products with more success.”

A British Chambers of Commerce survey in January 2011 found that language and cultural difficulties stopped about 5% of businesses from exporting – a small but very significant number of businesses – and 3% of non-exporters said that language training would encourage them to export for the first time. Of those companies looking to export, 9% said they had difficulty finding overseas customers or agents and 6% said they had difficulty finding market information.

Dr Marshall stressed the importance of language learning as a practical skill, saying that successful exporters and trading companies overseas already have global language capability – so we cannot simply rest on our laurels and say that ‘English is enough’. “We have to get over this barrier, as beyond exporting and investment, we don’t have other clear prospects for growth. Without a greater focus on modern languages we are not going to reach our growth expectations and targets.”

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Notes to Editors:

- 1. The Association for Language Learning (ALL):** ALL is the major UK national association of teachers of foreign languages, with over 5,000 members in all sectors of education: www.all-languages.org.uk / <http://tinyurl.com/ALLonFacebook>.
- 2. Languages Today magazine:** Languages Today is the termly magazine of the Association for Language Learning, designed specifically for language teachers: http://www.all-languages.org.uk/publications/languages_today.
- 3. PM signs joint letter to G20:** A letter signed by Australian, Canadian, Indonesian, Mexican and South Korean leaders raises pressing issues to be addressed at the G20 summit: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pm-signs-joint-letter-to-g20/>.
- 4. CBI delegates look for optimism:** the CBI calls on Prime Minister David Cameron to boost UK exports: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15826667>.
- 5. BCC international trade survey:** Britain's SME exporters are reliant on slow-growth markets, rather than countries experiencing rapid economic growth: http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/zones/policy/press-releases_1/bcc-new-trade-measures-welcome-but-must-reach-smaller-companies.html.
- 6. Globe-Gate Intercultural Web Project, USA:** "Are foreign languages needed in exporting? For making repeat business with your trading partner, you must do what you always do for success: know your customer." Bob Peckham at the University of Tennessee, on the need for modern foreign languages as part of a post-recession export imperative: <http://www.utm.edu/staff/bobp/french/flexport.html>.