

Converting a Tower of Babel into a Tower of Strength

As they move from country to country for work, family reasons or simply tourism, people need to communicate in languages other than their mother tongue. The impact of immigration and migration on economic, political and intellectual life in Europe is growing. While the changing world may generate fears about loss of identity, cultural diversity offers possibilities for innovation and growth. The challenge is to dispel the fears and harness new energies to enable Europe to realise its full potential.

Language learning was seen as a priority for the aims of economic growth and social cohesion in the Lisbon Strategy and this is why, in 2007, multilingualism was made a separate Commission portfolio. Multilingualism is about people communicating in more than one language as they go about their daily lives. Daunting though the task of establishing multilingualism throughout Europe might seem at first glance, it is not as if we were starting from scratch. Multilingual forms of communication include regional languages and dialects (such as Cockney and Geordie), and sign languages. People who speak a regional or minority language as well as their national language are multilingual but unaware of the fact! Most migrants in Europe speak the language with which they arrive, plus the language of their host country. Many Europeans grow up in mixed-language families. The notion of “mother tongue” has little meaning for them; they would probably feel more at home with the idea of a first language, or even several “first languages”.

While professional and student mobility are key driving forces, the effects on language learning of the revival of cross-border interaction and global tourism should not be underestimated.

However, more needs to be done. Europe must encourage people to embrace each other's culture, as this can have the knock-on benefits of raising awareness of people's own culture and attitudes while improving cooperation across language and cultural boundaries. Ways must be found to enable people to take full advantage of their freedom of movement.

The benefits of multilingualism for the individual are, however, only part of the picture. It also benefits society as a whole. Language learning has a major impact on the education of entire communities, and it has been proved that there are strong links between education and living standards, health standards and well-being in general.