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Why we should learn to say 'oui'

If we want to improve our language skills, we need to be more welcoming to foreigners.

By Nicholas Pyke

When four European ambassadors complained to The Independent about the state of language teaching in Britain this week, Kate Henry knew just how they felt.

Having thought that her son's secondary school in Exeter would be delighted to take a French exchange pupil for six months, particularly as it is currently applying for government money to be a languages college, she found she was wrong. St Peter's Church of England High School refused, saying it was oversubscribed. So 12-year-old Aurelien Nicolas, her son's French exchange partner, will be learning English at a nearby private school instead.

Mrs Henry has complained to Estelle Morris, the Education Secretary. After all, she says, French and German families regard exchanges as a basic part of growing up, and her own son, William, had no problem finding a place, spending six months with the Nicolas family in France.

"I don't want to victimise the school here. I just feel it's sad that this country can't embrace exchanges more," she says. "My son's French is marvellous after six months away, and he's had a wonderful time. People are not enthusiastic. It's the same old insular attitude."

The problem is not confined to Exeter. In fact, according

to the ambassadors – from Germany, Spain and Italy – along with the French envoy – British children take part in fewer language exchanges than children from any other EU country.

Meanwhile, one in 10 British companies is said to be losing business because of their clumsy reliance on English.

Terry Lamb, a lecturer at the University of Sheffield and president of the Association for Language Learning – the professional body for language teachers – knows what the ambassadors mean. He agrees that part of the problem lies with schools who feel they have little flexibility in the face of league tables, a fixed curriculum and, in many cases, fierce competition for places. This was the problem for St Peter's. The school did not want to comment this week. But it told Mrs Henry that, having turned away local children in September, it was unable to create a new place for an exchange pupil without compromising its admissions policy – the risk of legal action from disgruntled parents.

"Schools worry because they have all kinds of other targets to meet," says Mr Lamb. "We've become obsessed by the national curriculum. It's a great shame."

Whatever the shortcomings of some schools, the main stumbling block appears to be a shortage of families willing to have a foreign student back home. There seems to be an embarrassment about having a French person staying in the house, although that depends on the area. "A lot of families in the poorer areas think their accommodation isn't good enough," says Mr Lamb.

The education minister of Germany's Brandenburg state contacted Mr Lamb to beg for help in setting up English exchange schemes with schools in his area who had already encountered great difficulty.

Mr Lamb and the Association for Language Learning are further dismayed at proposals in this week's education green paper that will see languages become optional at secondary school – a further sign, he says, of the low value we give them.

On the other side of the Channel, Jacques Pinault runs En Famille International, the exchange programme that took Kate Henry's son to France. The shortage of English families means that En Famille has a queue of frustrated French and German students unable to find partners, and has had to set up links with California and Ontario instead. M. Pinault has 70 students on his books but, if more English speakers could be found, would take many more, so keen are continental students to learn English.

As fellow European nations line up to criticise Britain's appalling record, the Magdalen Court private school in Exeter is preparing to do something about it. It will soon be welcoming 12-year-old Aurelien Nicolas into its classrooms.

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