



# Parlez-vous English?



**Adam Lewis on**

## Do you know the French for 'recruitment'?

**H**ow many Brits do you think are living overseas? The answer is 5.5m. And if you include those who regularly spend part of the year living abroad, we're closing in on 6m. And the Institute for Public Policy Research, which supplied the statistics, is forecasting the number to steadily increase by the year.

So that's just about one in 10 of us, which is remarkable.

A large proportion of our jet-setting friends are professionals who have been lured abroad. Why? Reasons why an overseas assignment may look tempting range from the more pragmatic offer of a better job, to a more general desire to indulge in some wanderlust. But there's no denying that in today's job market, a candidate scores major points for being able to demonstrate success in foreign environments and cultures. And just under half are residing in non-English speaking countries. And what's the main problem these expats are having? That's right. Communication. Basic communication, mind you.

Yes, yes. We all know that English is the international language of business and culture; *The Times* once described the spread of English as a 'seismic event in our species' history'. Others haven't been as moderate, describing the language's growth as 'linguistic imperialism'.

And for those of us blessed to enjoy English as our mother tongue, we're quite chuffed, aren't we? We know we can get away with speaking English in any country in the world. And if they can't understand us, that's their deficiency, I'm afraid!

A recent EU study showed the UK nearly at the bottom of the pile regarding conversational knowledge of non-mother tongue languages (saved from total disgrace by our immigrant population, I assume). And our interest is quickly waning. In 1997, 71% of England's GCSE pupils took a

foreign language; last year the rate was down to 44%. Our professional ambassadors may be enjoying this lingual upper-hand in foreign lands, but this national indolence and condescension is at our own expense. As long as our engagement with the non-English speaking world is one-sided, we can expect our business relationships to remain superficial. However, research from Cardiff Business School suggests improving languages could add an extra £21bn to the UK economy.

One of our clients, Anne Murphy, who is a director at Delegate Recruitment, recently travelled to an international job fair in the Netherlands. She mentioned how astounded she was to having become accustomed to meeting candidates who spoke up to six languages.

Innovate CV has previously argued on our website (<http://innovatecv.wordpress.com/>) that our education system isn't adequately preparing our youth for the local job market. All the more should we be concerned for the growing international segment.

At the very least, successful candidates who are preparing for their overseas assignments need to be briefed how to 'internationalise' their English. For example:

1. Use plain English. Goodbye slang.
2. Give clear explanations.
3. Always go through processes fully, slowly, methodically and logically.
4. Speak slightly above your listener's level of English.

International recruiters cannot afford to underestimate multilingual candidates, to the immediate benefit of their clients — and to the long-term benefit of our very own economy.

● **Adam Lewis, chief operating officer, Innovate CV**

● **What do you think? Tell us at [recruiter.editorial@centaur.co.uk](mailto:recruiter.editorial@centaur.co.uk)**



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