Howe, P. (2017). *English as a second language? Schools need to stop treating it as an obstacle to success*. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved 29 November 2017, from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/11/21/english-second-language-schools-need-stop-treating-obstacle/

The Telegraph

English as a second language? Schools need to stop treating it as an obstacle to success


PETER T HOWE

21 NOVEMBER 2017 • 1:03PM

When columnist Andrew Pierce tweeted earlier this year that 1.3 million children "do not speak English as a first language, underlining strain immigration puts on schools" he understandably caused something of a social media stir.

Alongside some tweets of support, others were quick to point out that not having English as a mother tongue need not correlate to a student's ability to learn in their second, or third language. Even the author JK Rowling, a former teacher herself, joined the argument to point out that "second and third languages can be fluent".

With over 300 languages spoken in classrooms across the UK, and many schools in big towns and cities such as London and Birmingham, it is understandable that many will wonder how schools will be able to cater to all pupils and students equally.

However, as an educator who has taught in international schools across Europe, I strongly believe that such language issues needn't be a problem. In fact, if embraced they can stand to benefit all students, and by extension aid in supporting better understanding in areas with culturally diverse populations.

Today, I'm the Principal of UWC Atlantic College, an international college which each year educates around 360 students, who represent over 90 nationalities. English isn't even close to the first language for the majority of my students: at last count over 53 languages and dialects could be heard on campus. Yes, it can be a challenge, but it also represents real opportunities for students to learn from one another.

I'm not suggesting that schools should be expected to teach each student in their home languages. But rather than singling out those for whom English is a second language, at UWC we seize the platform to turn challenges into opportunities that benefit all students. Regardless of whether English is their first, second, or third language, why can't native English speakers be encouraged to learn about the mother tongue and cultures of their classmates?

Across the world the stereotype of Britain is a nation that isn't interested in learning a second language. For the rest of Europe, the idea of only speaking one's mother tongue would be a distinct disadvantage both socially and economically.

Over half of students in the European Union will study two or more foreign languages and International Baccalaureate students must study at least one other language in addition to English. While there is an argument that Europe's multilingual cultures stem from historically open borders, the UK shouldn't let the fact that it is an island nation allow it to slip into a linguistic monoculture.

The country where my college is based - Wales - is a case in point. Around 20 percent of the population speak Welsh and the government here has an ambition to effectively double that to one million speakers by 2050. Currently 22 percent of seven year olds attend a Welsh speaking school and the aim is to get that up to 30 percent. There's been

a real desire from non-Welsh speaking parents, sometimes from England, to send their English-speaking children to Welsh language schools to benefit from bilingualism. It can be done.

The backlash that resulted from Mr Pierce's tweet is just one example of how divisive the topic of language in schools can be. This is sadly ironic when you consider that the ability to converse with one's neighbours is the foundation of understanding. Fostering those conversations should take place in schools, and in multiple languages.

Those angered by Mr Pierce's tweet should be equally troubled that the UK's education authorities require that students who need support to develop English as a second language are categorised as having Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Regardless of the good intentions behind such a requirement, the fact is that applying such labels to pupils and students can have a detrimental effect on their self-esteem, confidence, and development. Such labels also stand to create divisions within classrooms, standing as a distinction between native and non-native English speakers. When applied to an individual you risk isolating a student; when applied to a group, it starts to look like classroom segregation.

Instead of looking at native, second and third languages to define our differences, we should be looking to use and develop language skills to unite our classrooms and communities.

When I was a teacher in Maastricht, Netherlands, a town which straddles the border with Belgium, a neighbouring town was looking for solutions to help better integrate a growing Turkish community. The lack of a shared language was perceived as one of the greatest obstacles, particularly when it came to schooling. As the head of college at an international school, I was asked for my opinion as to how the problem could be addressed.

I asked the question 'have you thought of allowing the Belgian students to study Turkish, so they can better communicate with their new classmates and to give Turkish students credit for proficiency in their mother tongue?' The logic is simple, you allow new students to actively participate in class, and in doing so allow native speaking students a new educational experience. All parties benefit.

Rather than seeing our 1.3 million non-native speaking students as a "strain", I would have used those 140 characters to share a different message: "We now have 1.3 million opportunities for UK students to learn their second language."

Peter T. Howe is Principal of UWC Atlantic College, the founding college of the United World Colleges movement and a co-creator of the International Baccalaureate