

To what extent does Multilingualism encourage Global Social Activism?

Our world is currently faced with a selection of intensifying threats – continuing human rights atrocities as well the devastating effects of climate change – as well as an opportunity to crush them. This opportunity lies in how future generations react to increasing globalization; the world is more well connected by online media than ever before, enabling increased accessibility to the exchange of ideas and information. This provides the space for activists and global citizens to spread these messages and organize movements to prioritise solving these pressing issues that become more urgent by the day. But how can we encourage future generations to develop into these global citizens and activists, and care about these issues as a priority? This research aims to uncover this, focusing on the role that multilingualism may play in the development of these values in an individual, and motivation to participate in global social activism.

Aims and objectives

This research aims to uncover any link between multilingualism and activism, first by gathering information previously researched on these topics in the form of a literature review, then conducting primary research. This primary qualitative research in the form of one focus group, one interview and surveys, will gather the opinions of current students and staff of the University of Leeds to gain recent and personal perspectives of how language has influenced their interest, awareness and involvement in activism. It will also uncover other benefits of learning languages, or likewise, other factors that contribute to an individual's motivation to participate. By assessing the benefits and relevance of multilingualism to global social activism, this research can support initiatives to promote a greater emphasis on language learning during any stage of education. This is to ensure that future generations are equipped with the correct mindset to prioritise these issues either as activists or throughout their careers. The literature review was pivotal in guiding the following research by revealing the three intertwined themes: identity, media and communication.

Results

- **100% multilingual respondents claimed that school influenced their language learning positively** (enthusiastic teacher role-models, emphasis on language in curriculum, specific benefits through learning languages in school). **50% monolinguals described that school influenced their language learning negatively** (lack of emphasis on language in schools, UK language learning flawed, avoided classes because they were “so bad”)
- **Half of those who speak or are learning more than one language still consider themselves multilingual!**
- **Double the number of respondents were learning a language than there were participating in GSA.** Other motivating factors besides language were referred to: Curiosity for other activists, education and personal interest, “giving back” having personally experienced benefits of activism, etc.
- An important theme that was also discussed with interview participants was how **language affects representation of social groups** (such as inequality portrayed in film), **and the accuracy or attention towards information about social issues in the media.**

Research Methodology

The compilation of the literature review helped guide the direction of the research conducted, as well as how it was to be written up and analysed. For example, three clear themes which supported my initial theories arose from the readings which connected language and activism: identity, media and communication. They are both outcomes of language learning and propagators of activism. With these themes in mind, responses were collected via anonymous online surveys, one focus group and one interview. Before carrying this out, the following definitions were chosen:

Multilingual: “the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives.”

Global Social Activism (GSA): “the use of direct and noticeable action, from home or abroad, to achieve social or political change in foreign countries.”

Examples of focus group/interview questions:

- Has having / learning other languages made you aware of global social issues? Can you give examples?
- Do you think there is any connection between language(s) and global activist activities, either generally or in your own experience?
- Can you remember a time when you felt motivated to participate in GSA - did you, or was there anything that stopped you?

The survey questions similarly focused on motivations to participate in activism and how personal factors, such as home/school, played a part in this. The results corroborated the need for improved language teaching and learning in schools, as supported by the contrast in responses between those who considered themselves monolingual, and those multilingual.

Conclusion

The data collected produced a variety of conclusions, many of which providing an intriguing starting point for further research (such as themes of performativity or representation in relation to activism, for example). Respondents were in agreement that:

- If English is your first language, you are not prevented from participating in global social activism. However, being able to understand other languages significantly impacts your involvement in practice (such as being able to communicate with those you help), as well as your awareness and understanding of issues around the world.

One respondent described how their knowledge of other languages helped them make a bigger impact during their volunteering. Numerous others who were multilingual explained how language plays a significant role in communicating narratives of issues across the world, contrasting with English both in terms of detail and outreach. This refers to how trends in the media that steer which issues are most important to focus on is largely dictated by their outreach to an English audience. It also draws upon experiences of individuals reading news in English versus the language most local to the issue, and identifying how details differ.