

To what extent does multilingualism encourage global social activism?

This study investigates the extent to which multilingualism encourages an individual to participate in global social activism, as well as any other links between language and activism. The opening literature review explores how identity and communication form much of this link, as they intertwine with both language and media. The results from surveys and interviews (one focus group, one individual interview) conducted shall then be analysed to delve further into how these topics influence participants' decisions and actions in their own lives. The desired outcome of this research would support cases to encourage more language learning in any stage of education as well as to encourage activism and the development of "global citizens" in future generations. A new generation of globally aware individuals should bring humanity one step closer to solving issues that can only be healed by direct attention, such as climate change or persisting inequalities around the world.

Activism is worth encouraging because it offers an alternative route to change besides policy change or legislation. This is because many societal inequalities and problems are embedded in attitudes and behaviour, which methods that can access the 'private sphere' of 'civil society' have the power to change (Ogunye, 2022). Using the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement as an example, legislative change is ultimately required to prevent atrocities legally and theologically justified in Iran, such as execution. Activism that can extend to out-groups such as women outside the regime or men within the same system, however, may help to alter views held by those who previously may have supported these issues. Zhora argues that activism also "contests local and global power structures and offers alternatives to the politics of force", as well as influencing "'mainstream' politics over fundamental world issues like trade, gender relations and the environment as well as war" (de Jong, 2005). Likewise, even in cases where legislation secured the development of social change (such as the Saffron Revolution in Burma which dissolved the military junta and freed political prisoners, or the Dagenham Women's strike which paved the way to securing equal pay for both genders), activism catalyses this process more urgently. It has also been suggested that activism can improve mental health, as it can reignite an individual's passion, empathy and purpose in life.

But why partake in *global* activism? Acknowledgement that issues do exist, and any reaction that this gages, arguably implicates an individual as Hornell Hart (1923) states that a social issue involves the agreement of numerous individuals that there is a problem, and that something should be done to solve it. Therefore, a social issue must become a *global* social issue if the individuals who agree that an issue needs resolving reside in different parts of the world. The "Women, Life, Freedom" protesters in L.A, who foremostly protest against the horrific treatment of women in Iran who are murdered for exercising basic human rights denied by the state are not all directly affected by events within the regime, but their outrage and solidarity with the movement means that this issue has impacted them, making it a global social issue (Backlund, 2023). Furthermore, whilst the women of Iran are the primary focus of protests, another reason that extends this issue across the world is that many may be protesting for change in a different context, drawing upon the most extreme cases to remind that these issues still exist and must be dealt with. The events in Iran act as a mirror from which to view inequalities in other societies which still demand attention, such as equal human rights across the world and equality for all women. This

demonstrates why the global element is important; an outward perspective to question human rights and environmental abuse across the world can reinforce the importance of these issues to those taking part so that they can still be remembered locally.

Global social activism in terms of both participation and media coverage has increased in the 21st century. The first reason for this is that the scale of threat, both through endangerment to life and the number of people at risk, has increased dramatically. This is because life on earth is indisputably threatened by one mass problem: climate change. It is described as “the largest, most pervasive threat to the natural environment and societies the world has ever experienced” (OHCHR, 2022), which affects all generations regardless of demographic divisions. That 45% of protests in 2019 were environmentalist does not indicate a reduction in protests about other issues, but instead, increased levels of participation in activism likely due to climate change (J. Bailey, 2020). Organisations such as Citizens’ Climate Lobby, Gender CC and 350 support climate activism across the world by providing training and resources to activists, in order to effectively lobby for improved environmental policies. Meanwhile, prominent environmentalist groups in the UK including Just Stop Oil (an off shoot of Extinction Rebellion) appear frequently in the news, resisting “co-operation (with) the state” until the government halts new fossil fuel licensing and production (Tidman, 2022).

The second reason is due to a wider outreach of information about these social issues to audiences, subsequently increasing awareness and therefore likelihood of more numbers participating. Even issues that directly impact fewer individuals are more present in our daily lives via online media, enabling more people to become inspired or involved as, referring back to Hart (1923), even acknowledging that change needs to take place creates a social issue and arguably implicates them. For example, individuals in Edinburgh are unlikely to be directly affected by indigenous exploitation in Ecuador, yet still engage in these issues and support indigenous social mobilisation (such as via events like glocal dialogues). The way in which ideas are spread is therefore a significant contributing factor to the rise of global activism.

My initial stance before conducting primary research is that identity and communication are the most prominent catalysts for activism. The responses gathered by a survey conducted in 2014 by Plantothrive also present these factors, including personal identity, a sense of obligation and purpose. Even factors that initially appear less related to identity, such as fear or urgency, have concern for others at its root, whether towards those in the global community or a genuine concern for future generations of their own or others’ families (Cox, 2014). Van Zomeren, Postmes and Spears confirm the role of identity, having researched and created the SIMCA model (Social Identity Model of Collective Action): “a sense of collective identification, sense of injustice or shared grievance, reward motivation, group-based emotion and group-based efficacy (Curtin, N., McGarty, C., 2016). Among other conclusions, they confirm that “identity bridge(s) the injustice and efficacy explanations of collective action” (van Zomeren, M., Postmes, T., & Spears, R. 2008). However, models such as this are contested to be focused only on movements propelled by those of shared identity rather than support from out-groups (such as heterosexuals supporting LGBTQ rights). That the models also lack diversification in methods of involvement, focusing primarily on protest, leaves room for my research not only to expand upon the role of identity as a global citizen but also the nuances between how activists get involved in different ways and whether the extent of their multilingualism has informed this at all (Curtin, N., McGarty, C., 2016).

Identity therefore bridges multilingualism and activism; it is a cause of activism, and a result of language. Likewise, global awareness encourages activism, and can also be a result of language. If a sense of collective identity is necessary to motivate participation in activism, experiencing a sense of global identity must surely encourage global activism. Stein-Smith argues that Calдини's notion that we like people who are similar to us can be applied to speaking the same language, which subsequently enables foreign languages to "facilitate communication and relationship building," as that collective identity of speaking the same language is reinforced (Stein-Smith, 2017). Identity therefore comes hand in hand with communication. Tabouret Keller argues that there is a close link between identity and language because "Language use offers the largest range of features and the most easily adoptable ones for identification, whatever such identification processes...may mean to the bearer" (Tabouret-Keller, A. 2017) In an interview with leaders of Polyglot, Judith Meyer shares that she learns multiple languages "in order to discover and connect with other cultures": "I have some friends in Serbia and Croatia with whom I currently still speak English, but learning their language makes me feel closer to them" (de Medeiros, A., Kelly, D., 2021). Judith here illustrates how learning a new language has reinforced her friendships with those of another culture, and therefore her sense of identity within a collective.

Communication also connects activism and multilingualism, described as "central to the projects and activities of GSA" (de Jong, 2005). Stein-Smith (2017) describes the importance of multilingualism as communication in relation to the UN, explaining that 6 official languages enables it to facilitate "effective communication on a broad array of global issue" (Stein-Smith, 2017). As well as languages used, the media by which they are communicated in raising awareness of global social issues to a wide audience, such as online websites and chat forums, is an important consideration when understanding how participation can be encouraged. The 'Battle for Seattle' has been argued to be one of the first protests in history that was coordinated seamlessly across the world via environmental factions online, setting a precedent for more recent examples of campaigns for global justice, such as the 'Glocal Dialogue' with CONAIE (indigenous mobilisation in Ecuador) both online and in person, in locations including Brighton and Edinburgh. Some literature even compares this to the creation of the printing press, the earliest example of the spread of ideas.

As well as providing a practical means of coordinating campaigns across the world, communication via media also promotes group identities. Ogunye's (2022) statement that "The stories we tell about different groups in society matter, and some groups get richer, deeper, more open-ended stories than others" emphasises how group identity can be perpetuated through media. It has also been suggested that "critical use of digital media for local and global communication" should be employed in foreign language teaching curriculums to heighten awareness of nuances across translations - this proves the significance in not only how media has the power to spread and change ideas, but how the precision of language use can alter meaning (de Medeiros, A., Kelly, D., 2021). That its power in depicting social groups is strong enough to incite consideration of how to deflect it also proves its story-telling power to wide audiences, which can be applied to social issues and encouragement of participation. It also provides a common space where people can connect over their interest in these issues and develop an identity through shared passion for certain topics. However, I argue that whilst online media is the medium by which large audiences are reached, the language of the message itself determines its meaning, tone and accessibility to participants across the world. Multilingualism arguably expands this understanding.

Other benefits of multilingualism include that it can “enhance mental capacity, develop insights into language and support the development of social and transcultural skills.” (de Medeiros, A., Kelly, D., 2021). These benefits link directly to participation in activism, as they nourish social and cultural intelligence and awareness. It is also contested that “those who do not possess (foreign language) skills risk being left behind, in the global marketplace of ideas, in the workplace, and even in social and personal life” - the global marketplace of ideas, in this context, representing the countless variations of narratives that can be understood only by speaking different languages, the perspectives of those implicated who can articulate most accurately information in their own language, or access to information about initiatives across the world to solve global social issues. Speaking multiple languages can also open doors, both career-wise and personally, particularly for youth such as through competitions (for example, ‘The Many Languages One World Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum (MLOW)’ (UN, 2017). Volunteering and career opportunities within organisations like UN often require capability in more than one language, which is why multilingualism is a useful step towards involvement in activism.

Multilingualism is also important to encourage as the skills provided, which expand opportunities to become a global citizen, will be all the more needed for future generations in an increasingly globalised world. This needs particular encouragement, as suggested by data of decreasing interest in languages among students in schools - for example, a decline in foreign language exam entries for GCSE students in Wales (by 64% 2002-2020) (British Council, 2020) as well as stigmas perpetuated by monolingualism surrounding foreign languages, such as appearing “unnatural” and as “self-contained systems” to speakers of the English lingua-franca (de Medeiros, A., Kelly, D., 2021). This research therefore aims to justify the importance of learning languages at any stage of education as well as any other factors that can encourage global activism.

In order to plan the study, “global social activism” and “multilingual” needed to be defined. The European Commission’s (2007) definition for multilingual was selected: “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.” This means that participants do not need to be fluent in any foreign language, as “an individual’s level of proficiency will vary [...] according to that individual’s social and cultural background, environment, needs and/or interests.” (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2006:14). The Cambridge Dictionary’s definition of activism, “the use of direct and noticeable action, from home or abroad, to achieve social or political change in foreign countries” was adapted to define “global social activism” by the addition of “from home or abroad,” meaning that activists can still support global causes from their current place of residence. Using these definitions, interview and survey questions were formed to ascertain how respondents gained their interest or knowledge in languages and activism via personal factors such as from home or school, as well as other benefits of language learning and their views on whether these topics intertwine.

The main conclusion formed from the data collected is that language alone is not the decisive factor overall that motivated individuals to participate in global social activism, and that knowing only English does not necessarily prevent interest. However, language knowledge in certain contexts significantly determines an individual’s awareness and understanding of an issue. It also plays a vital role in the representation and accessibility of information, as well as being a useful practical tool when helping

others with a different first language. Throughout results, the themes of identity, communication and language can also be identified.

To illustrate the general array of data, 11 surveys were submitted and 3 participants were interviewed, two in a focus group and one individually. The surveys showed more people involved in learning or speaking languages than participating in GSA (73% vs 36%), however for both participants in GSA and people learning or speaking other languages, the split between those who considered themselves “monolingual” and “multilingual” was even. This shows that there is no direct link between language and activism overall, however there was notably more depth in multilinguals’ responses to survey questions. Despite 67% of monolinguals learning or speaking other languages, they did not consider themselves multilingual, due to a general assumption that fluency is mandatory in any second language. Furthermore, the motivations of those who declared that they participated in GSA cover all the themes explored throughout the literature review and research: giving back to those whose position they identify with and fighting for their own rights, as well as curiosity developed by education.

Multiple respondents volunteered that global activism is currently very “English-centric” (in regard to language, and subsequently, media outreach). One interview participant provided numerous examples of how English, described as a “powerful language,” determined which global issues were “trendy,” based on their presentation in the media and subsequently the number of people exposed to it. One example that was drawn upon was the media attention given to the war in Ukraine and the Covid pandemic in contrast to the 600,000 deaths in Ethiopia during the civil war in the same period. This linked to their view that connotations of the word “global” are problematic, which arguably accentuate labels for groups of people. This demonstrates how even small details of the English language, widely used without question, can perpetuate divisions and a contrast in power between languages. The “performativity” of this word discussed in interview provides a starting point for any further research about challenging the authenticity of activism in specific cases. Survey respondents corroborated how central English is currently to activist opportunities. One respondent explained that “there is a big issue with GSA...being limited to the UK and the US,” and that “there is a very English-centric approach taken to activism online currently, so knowing English as your second language would be very useful.” Language therefore plays an important role in the accessibility of information about issues to be dealt with - that this is primarily English is problematic in some views, however this lends an interesting spotlight on the importance of learning a second language from the perspective of an individual whose first language isn’t English.

Respondents therefore agree that learning English as a second language is advantageous as it expands the number of opportunities available. One respondent described how learning English as their second language enabled more access to GSA resources compared to those of their first language, such as calls for job or volunteer positions and conference entries, whilst another agreed that English as a second language would be advantageous. An interview participant also explained how learning English as a second language opened access to more career/educational opportunities in different parts of the world: “the reason I’m here and able to participate in issues I care about is because I know English...if I had not known English that would cut me off from the rest of the world...I don’t take that for granted, but it does really depend on what language you speak.” They also explained how in their experience,

understanding English enabled critical comparisons between social norms in different societies: “People back home can look at England and America and say this is wrong, that's why they've abolished it, why are we still doing this...we can definitely learn from these countries.” They also explain that “For social activism, we have to be connected by the same language.” Another interview participant agreed with this, explaining that although they “would not say that only speaking English prevents you from learning about global social issues,” amongst the benefits of knowing English it’s “easy to forget the usefulness of other languages as well.”

Whilst respondents agree overall on the usefulness of knowing English and how this alone does not prevent involvement, there is still a significant emphasis on the importance and benefits of learning other languages when involved in global social activism. Firstly, knowing other languages can combat the “English-Centric” approach noted by respondents. This is because knowing other languages improves awareness of how the outreach of information is affected by its language. One interview participant noted how the spread of information about the 2023 submarine incident, where 5 people died, was far wider than that of the 700 who died travelling from Egypt to Greece, to which language can be attributed. Another awareness developed by multilingualism is of the nuances in language that convey information differently. For example, one survey respondent explained that reading a news story in the local language (in this case, Spanish) was more accurate and detailed than if it were read in English. This was an advantage noted by another survey participant, who explained that learning a second language taught them to more easily identify nuances and connotations between words. An interview participant similarly noted how certain words in one language sounded more “crass” in another. They also elaborated on how language plays a role in representing social groups in the media, such as the heightened objectification of women in Hindi films in contrast to Hollywood, which brought to question whether gender inequality is more prevalent in the culture associated with that language.

Another respondent shared that speaking another language was essential during their volunteer work as it enabled communication with those they were helping. Many other benefits of knowing other languages were identified - multilinguals said it encouraged a “deeper understanding of a different culture,” “increased the breadth of opportunities” and made learning other languages simpler, having already learnt the methods and structure of language learning. Languages are therefore a starting point from which to learn about culture and develop transferable skills such as applying the patterns of one skill to different contexts. Learning these during education could therefore teach these thought processes at an early age which will benefit a student for the rest of their academic career. Those who considered themselves monolingual referred to more leisure-based scenarios, such as “helping on holiday and listening to the radio,” “travelling the world” and “individual growth”. It was also said to enable interaction with others beyond our comfort zone, and that everyone should learn another language. This may indicate that those who consider themselves monolingual, despite speaking other languages, do so because they may only speak their other languages in exceptional circumstances such as on vacation. If this is the case, it may imply that their perception of what defines a multilingual (despite speaking other languages) as fluent prevents them from taking up other opportunities to use language such as professionally or during volunteer work.

Whilst respondents agree that languages are important, it is noted that there are a multitude of other factors that motivate a person to participate in GSA. However, the status of the respondents affects how

important they believe languages are to GSA; all multilinguals responded to this question either with “very important” or “important,” whilst monolinguals describe it as “important” or “neutral” only. Furthermore, 60% multilinguals agreed that language extended GSA opportunities in contrast to only 16% of monolinguals. This might be due to a difference in perceived skill, fluency or confidence. A multilingual respondent notes that in their experience, knowing another language does not necessarily extend the number of opportunities made available to them, but more so highlights the need for multilingualism and having such skills when volunteering. Other motivations for participating in GSA include personal interest, (linking to identity with those they want to help), giving back having benefited from GSA personally, and influence through research/education. One interviewee said that they “pay attention more to whatever is kind of trendy around social media,” dictated by how widely spoken a certain language was. This is reinforced by a survey respondent who referred to radio news, a different form of media, which kept them aware of global social issues.

The role that schooling plays in a person’s engagement in languages is pivotal. Half of monolingual survey respondents volunteered that UK language learning is flawed and that there was a lack of emphasis on languages in schools - one even avoided attending language classes “because they were so bad.” In contrast, all who considered themselves multilingual described positive influences in school. This entailed “enthusiastic teachers,” that their language teachers in primary school were role models, and the school curriculum. For example, one respondent attended a language specialist school, whilst another’s school offered the option of learning a third language along with the two already expected of the students. The options available in schools that placed more emphasis on language teaching were also said to inspire pursuit of other languages, perhaps due to the confidence developed in learning another language well in school. It is therefore very clear that the influences of teachers’ enthusiasm and the structure of the school curriculum made a significant difference. The challenges of learning a new language alongside a busy academic schedule were also emphasised by interview participants, and that whilst online options were available such as Duolingo, it is not as thorough as the in person language teaching that schools can offer: “I don't think it's a great way to learn...you really need a dedicated person to teach you.”

There is also a contrast between monolinguals and multilinguals regarding whether school factors impacted participation in GSA. More monolinguals were likely to state “none,” whilst all multilinguals could draw upon some experiences. School was said to build knowledge and facilitate debate about global issues which increased awareness, and University developed a global network with others who cared about the same issues regarding development and policies, which the respondent is still in contact with. The monolinguals that detailed school’s role in their involvement in GSA primarily referred to it in terms of career progression, mentioning that it cropped up when researching careers as well as during debates at different stages of education, such as A-Level. This was mentioned to be a channel through which to express one respondent’s “outspokenness,” so it could be inferred that involvement in schools had less of a direct intention towards solving global issues, but more in the name of practicing skills such as public speaking to improve employability.

Some overall conclusions can therefore be deduced: speaking English alone does not necessarily prevent interest or motivation to participate in global social activism, but understanding or learning other languages significantly impacts involvement in practice (such as being able to communicate with those receiving aid), as well as awareness and understanding of issues around the world. This is due to the

other benefits of learning a language, applied to a GSA context: understanding how language alters social group representation and information in the media, an understanding of culture and increased opportunities to connect with people who speak different languages both professionally and personally. The results also show how school significantly impacts an individuals' extent of multilingualism, based on the emphasis on the importance of languages within a curriculum as well as the excitement around languages portrayed by enthusiastic teachers. To encourage increased participation in GSA throughout future generations, I therefore argue that learning languages to reap these benefits would be not singularly responsible but instead a significant contributing factor to broadening perspectives. As corroborated by the data, this can be driven by increased attention to languages in schools and any stage in education, to teach the importance of considering the planet as a whole and subsequently prioritising the resolution of human rights and environmental crises that continue.

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