



BY

Laurel Zuckerman (H.87),
author of *Sorbonne confidential*, Fayard

IDEA >

LET'S OUTSOURCE ENGLISH!

A modest proposal for lifting a terrible burden from the finances and morale of the French people

I recently read in a reputable French magazine that 97% of French children spend ten years studying English, while only three – DSK (H.71), Jean-Louis Borloo (MBA.76), and José Bové (*sans diplôme*) – have actually learned to communicate in that language.

What, the HEC in me asks, is the cost of producing one *français bilingue*?

Take the *masse salariale* of all English teachers from CE1 to terminal; add recruitment, training, and pension costs; then divide by the number of students familiar with the term “chugging”.* We notice that if not for DSK, Borloo and Bové, the unit cost would be not just infinite, but impossible.

Why not BUY the English speakers we need instead of manufacturing them ourselves?

Outsourcing? skeptics shriek: Americans are too expensive and the British drive us nuts! Granted. But these days, everyone speaks English: Finns, Swedes, Dutch, Germans, Greeks,—hell, even the Spanish!

What is the cost of producing one *français bilingue*?

And as for cost, ex-iron curtain countries offer top *rapport qualité-prix*. That Polish plumber (yum!) comes linguistically equipped!

How did they do it, those other countries? How did they master real English while we struggle to distinguish “pigs’ feet” (what pigs walk on) from “pigs’ trotters” (what you eat)?

The HEC that I am itches to *benchmark*.

Let’s start with primary school. In France, the government decreed that CE2 learn English, then went home to watch *Friends* in VF. In the little countries (ok-Germany is technically bigger, but size is a state of mind), schools hired teachers who knew English and were trained to teach it! As a result, ten-year-old Finns speak better English than the people teaching it in France.

“Why,” I asked an E. N. expert, “do we waste time and money pretending to teach English in primary school?” He assured me that fake teaching didn’t hurt anyone. And there were other considerations.



“After all,” he explained, “if French children learn to speak English, what will the Africans do?”

What will the Africans do? This is exactly the kind of super-power calculation that little countries like Luxembourg never have to worry about—an unfair advantage!

As for middle school (*collège*) and high school (*lycée*), successful countries focus on “everyday language communication” and an “open mind” while France aims at “grammatical correctness” which leads to “excessive use of French”.**

And yet, France selects its teachers with uncommon rigor.

Louis XV introduced the *concours d’agrégation* in 1766 to replace Jesuit teachers whom he had decided to kill. Today’s *agrégés d’anglais* must analyze a “*problématique*” of grammar and write a seven-hour *dissertation cartésienne* in impeccable French—skills acquired by no other English teachers in the world! Given this pedagogical elite, the students’ terrible results are simply inexplicable.

Could France adopt the *best practices* of successful European countries? (Hire competent English teachers in primary school; replace the *concours* system in *collèges* and *lycées* with quality teacher training; stop worrying about the Africans...) One glance at an official’s face suggests it may be easier to ban outright the teaching of English in all French public schools instead.

The billions of hours and euros thus saved could be reinvested in the study of French, under attack from rappers, MSN, SMS and novelists who eliminate vowels.

But what about the teachers? In the primary school, no problem exists. As for *collèges* and *lycées*, certified teachers could, given their excellent *dissertation* skills, switch to teaching French.

“But!” cried a friend of mine, an ardent social progressive, “if you eliminate English from public schools, only the children of the wealthy who can afford *cours de soutien scolaire* (tax deductible), *séjours linguistiques*, *prépas* and *grandes écoles* such as HEC, will master the international language of business. All the others will be at a tremendous disadvantage in their professional careers. That is grotesquely discriminatory, profoundly unjust, and horribly *inégalitaire*!”

“Yes,” I admitted, “that would be an intolerable situation.”

*To this, philosophers might want to add : (classroom hours devoted to English * children trapped in those classrooms *value of each minute lost to vain pursuits in our finite existence*60).

**2002 European Assessment of English, France ranks last of the seven European countries evaluated