

David Cameron used an article in [The Times](#) and an interview on Radio 4's [Today](#) show to announce £20m of extra funding to provide English lessons for Muslim women in the UK to prevent them from becoming “second-class citizens”. The prime minister’s announcement has come [in](#) [for harsh criticism](#), particularly [his implication](#) that not speaking English was tied up with a person’s identity and could make someone “more susceptible to the extremist message”.

As a researcher studying the teaching of English as an additional language, my main problem with the proposal is the underlying assumption that if mothers could only speak English fluently then their children would not become radicalised.

This monolingual view of family life ignores the fact that these same mothers will be doubtless trying to raise their children to have sound ethics and morals, ready to make a contribution to society just like any good English-speaking mother – just through another language.

We have no evidence to suggest that there is any link at all between parental level of English and extremism, quite the opposite. Look, for example, at how [some of the appeals](#) made by parents of would-be Jihadis who have run off to Syria, are made in entirely fluent Standard English, often with regional accents.

An appeal made by a man whose daughter has gone to Syria.

A [2014 study](#) on people’s vulnerability to radicalisation found that migrants not born in the UK, from poorer backgrounds and with strong links to their community were less likely to be radicalised than those from more privileged backgrounds. The English language is not the only form of “social capital” that fights extremism.

Hypocrisy in a landscape of cuts

Others have expressed further concerns about the new policy. [Martin Doel](#), chief executive of the Association of Colleges, pointed out that this new funding, though welcome, “does not make up for a 50% (£160m) reduction in the funds available for teaching ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] courses between 2008 and 2015”. Of this, [£45m](#) was as recently as July last year.

This recent cut alone was, according to Doel, likely to lead to the closure of as many as 47 colleges offering ESOL classes affecting 17,000 students. While £20m in extra funding may sound a lot, if there actually are some 190,000 Muslim women in need of English tuition – as the [prime minister claimed](#) – this would amount to £100 a head. That won’t go far and appears hypocritical in the face of the [wider funding squeeze](#) facing adult education.

Others, including the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages, [have questioned](#) the prioritisation of Muslim women, arguing that to “ensure all migrants integrate successfully into British life ... more funding needs to be made available to support both men and women from all religious backgrounds so that they can learn English”.

The main concern over the initiative appears to be suspicions about the government’s motives, with critics alarmed at [the association](#) the prime minister has made between a lack of English and vulnerability to extremism.

A further concern is over the possibility of deporting mothers if they fail to make sufficient progress in English after two and a half years. “You can’t guarantee you’ll be able to stay if you’re not improving your language,” [Cameron said](#).

Any question that [a spousal visa](#) application could be denied to women who fail an English language test could have extremely serious implications for families. Legal experts [have been quick to point out](#) that such deportations could be challenged under the Human Rights Act.

Security creep into language lessons

Perhaps the answer to why the government insists with a ramping up of these kind of policies lies in the concept of [“securitisation”](#). This has been explained by language scholar Kamran Khan as the process through which successive UK governments since 9/11 have forged the link between language, immigration and the threat of extremism.

The links are not hard to trace. Back in 2001, speaking in the [House of Commons](#) following local rioting involving Asian youths, Anne Cryer, the Labour MP for Keighley, said:

We need to examine why those young Asian men were so keen to join in the criminal activity ... There is little point in blaming the situation simply on racism and Islamophobia ... The main cause is the lack of a good level of English, which stems directly from the established tradition of bringing wives and husbands from the sub-continent who have often had no education and have no English.

In 2002, the National Immigration and Asylum Act required that immigrants have “sufficient knowledge” of English for citizenship. Three years later the [Life in the UK](#) citizenship test was introduced, testing both English and knowledge of British life. A speaking and listening component was added to the test in 2013 – adding on another layer of difficulty to passing the test.

We knew that there would be further incentives and penalties introduced in order to make people learn English, thanks to indications given in a 2015 speech by the home secretary, [Theresa May](#).

But if the government is seriously considering it acceptable to break up families because a mother has failed to make “sufficient progress” in her English, then we should all start to worry about who exactly are the extremists and just where the real threats to our civil society and its values lie.

Frank Monaghan is affiliated with NALDIC (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum), the UK's professional association for people working with EAL in schools.

Why English language lessons are not the answer to radicalisation

Written by The Conversation USA

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