

Funding the Future

Article URL

Published: January 12, 2026, 6:17 pm

The government now wants migrants to speak English at A-level standard. But what does that really mean?

In this video, I argue that this policy isn't about communication — it's about control.

You don't need to quote Jane Austen to contribute to British society. You need empathy, skills and the ability to connect, and most people achieve that without studying 19th-century novels.

This is another false barrier designed to exclude, not include.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LM_4SGEFjh4?si=4WIOYolqaAJ4ultv

This is the transcript:

Do you have an English A-level? No? Nor do I.

I thought about taking it when I was 16. My English teachers, all of them very good, I should add - amongst the best I've ever had on any subject anywhere - wanted me to take it because I did pretty well in my O-level English, as we then had. But the truth was, I wanted to take history, and I don't regret that. And I mastered the English language anyway.

But the government has now decided in its wisdom, or rather in its lack of wisdom, that migrants into this country should have English at A-level equivalent standard. But what does that mean?

If I have managed to write millions of words in my career, which a vast number of people have read, and if I have managed to create quite a lot of video, that millions of

people have watched, and very few have complained about with regard to its grammatical construction, why did I need English A-level, and why does a migrant into this country need English A-level?

What is this about? I think it's about control. You don't need to know about Jane Austen's novels to be a participant in society in the UK, because let me assure you, most people don't.

You don't need to have read Charles Dickens or Trollope, or to bring things further forward, Arthur Miller, or whoever it might be that you want to look at.

English literature and the study of poetry, that is normally a part of an A-level English course, doesn't make you a member of our society. In fact, if anything, it makes you an outsider because you understand something that most people don't and see the world in a way that others won't understand as a consequence. It's not a symbol of inclusion, in other words.

But nor is a particular use of language a sign of inclusion. People in Scotland have words that are quite simply different from people in England.

People in England don't always use language in the same way.

People in Wales most definitely use different structures for language than do people in England.

And in Ireland, people use words that are just, well, almost unknown to anybody outside that island. A word like 'soft', for example, which in Ireland means it's a sort of dull misery day, but which never means that in the rest of the British Isles.

So English doesn't actually prove the ability to communicate either.

So what is this about? Control. It's all control. It's about denying people access, of course, by putting up artificial barriers to entry to come into this country to allow only the privileged to gain access to the UK because you've got to be pretty privileged to come from another country and have the equivalent of A-level English in addition to any other qualifications that you might have, and also the financial resources that will now let you get in.

And it's about control in the sense of saying there is an accepted form of society, when there isn't.

I know lots and lots of people who can communicate very effectively, who tell me they never write a word. Time and time again, when I tell people I've written five blogs in a day, they look at me, well, aghast, totally amazed, surprised. "I haven't written an essay since I left school," they tell me, and I believe them. They can't remember the last time they wrote a letter. Their emails might be three lines long at most. If they're

forced to, they can write out a text message, but it works, and that's all that matters.

So why are we creating this false standard? Simply because people in government are reflecting the prejudice against people coming into this country in a way that ensures they don't, and I condemn them for that.

People who can cook well don't need to be able to write well. There are people on television who are very good television chefs, but who have autism, or dyslexia, or ADHD, or whatever, and basically aren't able to even read and write.

There are actors who have to learn their lines orally because they can't read, and it doesn't matter. They've learned to cope.

But we're excluding anybody like that from the UK as a consequence, and yet these people are often the strongest innovators of all because they've overcome adversity and have succeeded nonetheless.

English A-level is a shibboleth, and a shibboleth, for those who don't know about it, is a dividing line; a barrier, something you have to get over if you are to get on, and it's artificial, in most cases. A crack in the world, which is put there to ensure that some people are on one side and others, the preferred, are on the better side. That is what the government's doing here. I condemn them for it. We don't need this.

I don't dispute that it helps to be able to speak English if you live in this country, but the vast majority of people who live here do get to that point anyway. Because they see the world around them, because they hear the world around them, because they want to communicate with the people around them, they will learn English, and they'll learn it in the way that is necessary in the community where they live, which we use language in a way that may not be taught by an English textbook, let alone a 19th-century Victorian novel.

So, let's stop this nonsense. Let's talk about the value of communication. The value of skills. The value of diversity. The value of having people who've overcome adversity, and not talk about putting impediments into the path of people with ability, who want to live in our community and contribute to its well-being.

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

Comments

When commenting, please take note of this blog's comment policy, [which is available here](#). **Contravening this policy will result in comments being deleted before or after initial publication at the editor's sole discretion and without explanation being required or offered.**