

“A FUTURE FOR LANGUAGES IN SCHOOLS?”

The London Centre for Languages and Cultures
Pembroke College Oxford, Friday 3 July 2015

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS

Published: October 2015

CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
Final Plenary	2
2. WORKING GROUPS	3
Schools	3
Universities	5
Policy	8

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Friday 3 July 2015, the London Centre for Languages and Cultures hosted a colloquium, entitled “A Future for Languages in Schools?” at Pembroke College Oxford. Convening over seventy people from the world of language education in the UK – from schools, universities, government, and from language and cultural organisations – the colloquium sought to address some of the most pressing problems currently facing MFL as a subject and, through open, cross-sector dialogue, to find solutions to what amounts to something of a crisis.

The day comprised keynote speeches by Peter Horrocks (Vice-Chancellor of The Open University and former Director of the BBC World Service) and Oliver Miles (Former British Ambassador to Libya, Luxembourg and Greece); a scene-setting presentation from Kathryn Board and Teresa Tinsley, authors of the 2014-15 *Language Trends Survey*; and a panel presentation by various London Schools Excellence Fund projects introduced by Munira Mirza, Deputy Mayor for Education and Culture at the Greater London Authority. At the core of the day’s proceedings, however, were three parallel working groups, each led by an expert in the respective field, focusing on the key areas of Schools, Universities, and Policy. Each delegate sat on one of these three groups, discussing in-depth some of the challenges faced, and aiming to come up with a series of action points and recommendations. Findings from each group were then brought together in the final plenary session, from which an overarching set of headline observations and recommendations was formulated.

FINAL PLENARY

Headline Recommendations from Final Plenary

- The principal recommendation is that a working group be taken forward from the colloquium, representing all interested sectors, in order to develop its findings and present them to policy-makers
- There needs to be a coherent pathway from primary, to secondary, to higher education, with mutual understanding of what is happening at each level, and greater amounts of cooperation and sharing of resources and expertise
- Curriculum time for languages in schools needs to be increased, and the institutional status of MFL as a subject made more central in schools (and indeed in universities). This is dependent on a range of factors, not least a greater recognition of the cultural *and* economic benefits of languages, and the provision of adequate support and resources from government
- Language curricula need to be reconsidered, and greater investigation made into the motivations of students at all levels. It is essential to avoid false dichotomies between languages (or humanities more generally) and STEM
- More support is needed for lesser-taught and community languages (both ‘formal’ – in terms of official examinations – and ‘informal’ support). These languages offer a range of benefits which are invaluable but not always immediately evident or predictable
- Finally, the principle that languages in schools must be available to all, not just the most academically able, needs to be reaffirmed

2. WORKING GROUPS

More detailed accounts of the discussions and recommendations of each of the three working groups can be found in this section.

Schools

Summary of Chair’s Introduction

The title of the colloquium asks a question: ‘Is there a future for languages in schools?’ First of all, we should answer the question and say that, yes, there is a future. There is undoubtedly a serious decline in MFL, but at the same time, there also exists excellent practice in schools, which needs to be built on. The MFL landscape is currently very uneven, with some teachers and pupils benefiting from a wide range of projects and training, and others remaining unaware that such initiatives even exist, or being otherwise unable to access them. There are distinct but closely related issues to be addressed in primary and secondary schools: at primary level, a significant problem is lack of expertise and a hugely uneven level of provision; whilst at secondary level, the problems include declining student numbers, declining contact time with teachers, and curricula and examinations that many have little confidence in.

Summary of Discussion

The discussion in the Schools group primarily focused on three broad themes: content and curriculum; the status of MFL within schools; and coherence and continuity between different education levels (particularly the relationship between schools and universities).

Some present felt that current MFL curricula in schools are problematic, that they compromise engaging teaching and learning: students are turned off by the content offered in KS3, with a perception that it is ‘trivial’ and that therefore pupils take minimal interest in the subject. Consequently, the ‘jump’ from trivial content at KS3/4 to more advanced material at KS5 was off-putting to many students. However, it should be noted that this charge of trivial, uninspiring content was not universally endorsed by the group, with other delegates feeling that content is ‘what you make of it’, and that it is *methodology* as opposed to content which enthuses and interests pupils. One delegate made the point that most students’ capacity for creativity is infinite, whatever the material they are working with: teachers should foster this by being creative with the curriculum, exploiting technology wherever possible. A corollary to this was that it was widely felt that there should be a greater focus on speaking and communication in language lessons from an earlier age: some delegates felt that a language curriculum centred on communication rather than content would yield significant dividends both to pupils’ enjoyment of and attainment in languages.

On a related note, significant time in the discussion was devoted to the perceived severe grading of MFL when compared to other subjects. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, as with the discussion about language curricula, there was disagreement within the group about this issue: some delegates felt that GCSE examinations in particular are already quite trivial, and that it would be a mistake to mark them even more leniently. However others pointed out that there is a significant amount of data which suggests that harsh grading in MFL is clearly discernible when compared to other subjects, and that therefore MFL is put at a marked disadvantage within schools. This is an issue which is currently being addressed by Ofqual, so it was felt by the chair that further discussion should wait until the outcomes of the regulator’s investigation are known.

The second broad area of discussion focused on the status of MFL within schools: it was felt that the timetabling of languages in many schools requires a rethink. A widely-reported trend is that the amount of contact time that secondary school teachers have with their pupils is being steadily eroded; whilst those involved in primary education have reported that the one hour per week devoted to languages at KS2 was woefully insufficient. In addition, ‘elitism’ was cited as a problem: languages are increasingly seen in many schools as being only for the ‘brightest’ of pupils, leading to the exclusion of pupils seen as less likely to attain higher grades. In secondary schools in particular, these problems are compounded by a view that languages are ‘hard’ subjects, in which pupils are less likely to achieve the highest grades: languages are therefore in danger of being viewed unfavourably by SLTs concerned about school league tables. With the introduction of the two-year A Level, it is feared that this problem may get even worse. Crucially, there is a socio-economic dimension to the problem, it being noted that 32% of all A Level MFL entries come from students in the independent sector, a figure hugely disproportionate to the overall number of post-16 students educated in independent schools.

Teachers and others in the group felt very strongly that the opportunity to learn a language must be an entitlement for *all* pupils, not just a select few. The point was made that competency in foreign languages improves pupils’ all-round literacy, including in English, as well as other critical and problem-solving skills: skills which do ultimately have a measurable impact on league table performance. Furthermore, it was observed that if contact time were to be increased, results would improve accordingly, thus helping to alleviate league table worries. A strong message to government from the group was that a minimum time for MFL would be essential if a Core GCSE were to be implemented. Discussion also turned to other ways of increasing learning time for language students, whether or not guidance on minimum curriculum time is implemented, in particular, the greater use of technology. However, it should also be noted that technology is not a panacea, and should be seen as a complement to, not a replacement for, direct contact time with trained, motivated teachers.

Finally, the discussion turned to continuity between key stages and on to higher education, in keeping with one of the overarching themes of the colloquium: it was agreed that a ‘longitudinal’ approach is key. Currently, the inconsistency of primary provision, and the lack of continuity between primary and secondary schools, is something which policy makers in schools and in government need to note. Significant time was devoted to the role that higher education institutions have to play in supporting languages at school level. It was suggested that universities and university language centres could take a more active approach, linking strategically with both the primary and secondary sectors country-wide, thereby (hopefully) improving their own uptake in languages. Amongst the main areas in which universities could take an active role are: creation of online, accessible materials and resources; provision of language upskilling for teachers (particularly for primary teachers, where level of subject competency is much more varied); and working with secondary schools to instil in youngsters the importance of language skills and language qualifications for career development, mobility, and intercultural understanding. Universities should begin to actively engage with pupils from a younger age, say from Year 6 onwards.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The key message was that the government *and* language teaching and learning communities need to have a coherent languages strategy, put together with language learning expertise, from KS2 through the KS5

- Universities, too, have a role in ensuring continuity from secondary to higher education, including in producing materials that non-specialists in schools could use in the classroom. Universities should seek a greater understanding of what is happening in schools, to put into context the students that they wish to recruit
- Proper long-term planning *with adequate funding* is essential for the success of languages in KS2, and for the introduction of languages into Core provision at KS4. Curriculum time needs to be increased, and the importance of languages needs to be instilled at an institutional level. The content of language curricula should be rethought (although there is not agreement on what shape this should take)
- The reinstatement of informed language subject inspection is essential, to support quality assurance of teaching and in-service training. Teacher upskilling, and the recruitment of motivated and specialist teachers, are vital. This requires a long-term solution: ‘the language students of today are the language teachers of tomorrow’

Universities

Summary of Chair’s Introduction

The challenges facing schools, and in consequence universities, are widely recognized: declining numbers studying languages in schools at GCSE and A Level; unduly stringent assessment regimes, leading to perceptions that languages are more difficult to gain good grades in than other subjects, discouragement of language study by school managements, coupled with unattractive and/or insufficiently challenging A Level courses; insufficient numbers of suitably qualified teachers, or sufficiently large cohorts of students to justify running school (and in turn, university) language courses; a lack of clarity about what language study involves and where it can lead; dissatisfaction with A Level course content; the ongoing decline of language study in state and increasingly independent schools; virtual disappearance of some languages in state and even independent schools; and a corresponding decline in, and closure of, many university language courses and departments.

Summary of Discussion

The discussion began with careers and employability. Diverse, sometimes contradictory, statistics on employer preferences and the employment outcomes of linguists were cited, from those suggesting that languages ranked low in terms of desirability to employers, with only 6% regarding speaking foreign languages as an essential core competence in the 2014 CBI/Pearson Education and Skills survey, to those indicating the reverse. The 2013 Forman-Peck study estimates a £48bn business deficit attributable to inadequate language skills, whilst the 2013-14 HESA leavers’ destinations report states that 88% of ML graduates were in employment or postgraduate education six months after graduating – above the average for all subjects, equal to maths, biological sciences, design and engineering and ahead of physics, chemistry, business studies, history and philosophy. The apparently low ranking of ML graduates in employment terms is explained by the fact that many go on to do Masters degrees in other subjects (and are hence not statistically recorded as languages graduates) before subsequently achieving very good employment outcomes; if outcomes after Masters degrees are considered, over 92% of ML graduates are in full-time employment, ahead of physics, chemistry, maths, computer science, history and business studies, and behind only

medicine, law and teaching.¹ Other issues with data collection were also mentioned, for example that statistics concentrate on UK employment, whereas UK language graduates are employed worldwide; better data would need to be gathered for a clearer picture to be obtained. There was also a perceived mismatch between the nature of language study in degrees, typically concentrating on one or two languages and, say, their literatures and cultures, and employer needs for oral and especially written skills in two or three languages other than English with deeper understanding and experience of other languages and cultures than could be gained from short language courses. Whilst large employers could afford to employ specialist language degree holders, SMEs could not; UK graduates, even language graduates, were at a real disadvantage compared to worldwide peers at ease in several languages beyond English, and UK English is often a less effective means of communication than international English.

The diversity of views concerning careers and employability was mirrored by student perceptions of, and motivations for, university language study and by university language course content. The decline in traditional academic, ‘Russell Group’ type language departments was not necessarily mirrored by a decline in study or uptake of languages at university, which was often in relation to other subjects or competences. Student motivations for language study could range from a desire to practise a world language such as Spanish, and to acquire effective communication skills, to more traditional academic and intellectual objectives. There was a perceived, and perhaps actual, polarity between ‘traditional’ and ‘practical’ language degrees, and it was thought necessary to explore both student motivation and curricula with a view to determining whether they, or their diversity, were fit for purpose. The course, and individual, identity of languages and/or ‘linguists’ was not clear: were they language practitioners, and/or scholars of language, linguistics, literature, politics and culture? The relationship between language degrees and employment possibilities could be uncertain; even on applied language courses, conventional ML students could be less confident and certain of their abilities and potential than those studying languages and management who had done year-abroad internships. Whilst it might be inappropriate to become unduly concerned about the question of employment or to revise course content accordingly, given that application numbers in other humanities subjects without obvious employment paths (e.g. History, English) were holding up well, the dearth of language-qualified student applicants could signal a need to offer more *ab initio* language degrees, and to present their content and potential more clearly; one university was taking 25% of its intake in German as beginners; *ab initio* teaching was highly successful in Japanese at another, and might also be considered for French. School and university evidence suggested that student motivations for studying a language degree could vary widely, from those who loved literature and reading, to those who preferred communication. But potential applicants were often not aware of the range of opportunities which were available, especially for *ab initio* courses.

A further issue (highlighted in the closing plenary discussion) was the nature, delivery and standard of university language teaching provision. Potential applicants could be uncertain about how much and what standard of language provision a given degree might offer, because no clear information was available pre-application, and their on-course experience could be disappointing, especially in respect of monolingual and oral practice. A perceived or actual withdrawal of traditional UK ML lecturers from hands-on language teaching in response to other (e.g. REF-related) pressures had not been matched by a rise in the status, pay or career-paths of dedicated language-teaching

¹<http://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2014/06/more-firms-demanding-language-skills-to-break-into-new-markets-cbi-pearson-survey/> <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/dec/10/language-skills-deficit-costs-uk-economy>; HESA – Destinations of leavers 2013-14: <http://bookshelf.mml.ox.ac.uk/> Accessed 6 July 2015.

professionals; as language-teaching was often one of the most costly and labour-intensive ML course elements, there was a serious conflict between language teaching needs and costs (higher than those in other subjects or than in the past) and intense financial pressures. Online, IT-based language courses via MOOCs such as The Open University’s FutureLearn offered potential pedagogic solutions and economies, particularly if institutions shared expertise or operated in regional hubs, potentially with schools. Such developments might help address the marked regional diversity in school language study and uptake, currently highest in London and the South-East and lowest in the North-West, and also the extreme inequity in language study between the state and independent sectors, whereby the latter teaches only 7% of the school cohort (rising to around 18% post-16) but accounts for 32% of language A Levels. However, there were quality-control and HR risks. Such solutions might be seen as opportunities merely to reduce ML staffing costs, and it was uncertain whether students would regard such virtual learning shared between institutions as acceptable in respect of high (and in time increasing) university fees and loan burdens. The competition between HEIs (and schools) for students is currently inimical to such sharing and to the hub model, however desirable it might be in principle.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- ‘Languages’ form a highly diverse and vibrant area of study, offering all sorts of education, experiences, skills and outcomes. But this very diversity raises institutional and economic, intellectual and practical questions, as if the many disciplines grouped under ‘the humanities’ were to be treated as a single subject. There is a lack of clarity concerning the definition and nature of university language study and its benefits: the reasons potential students might pursue it, course content, purpose, and employment and other career paths.
- This lack of clarity is symbolized by the diversity of statistics on employment outcomes, which points to a wider question of legibility for languages. Employability rankings depend on factors such as what ‘languages’ means (traditional and/or applied ML competences?); where language competence ranks in employers’ desiderata and what kinds of skills might be needed. Reasons for student interest in studying languages at university were diverse, from the traditionally intellectual to the practical and the applied; from those who loved reading or hated grammar to those who wished simply to communicate, a range to some extent reflected by the variety of language or language-related degrees on offer. But potential students, especially from non-traditional backgrounds, and perhaps schools, were often unaware of what was available, and there was often a lack of clarity on the part of universities about possibilities and outcomes, suggesting that large pools of potential applicants were remaining untapped.
- Although employability was important, careers should not be the only or prime criterion when designing or delivering degrees. Good application and employment success rates for other humanities degrees (e.g. History, English) without obvious post-degree career paths might indicate that other factors were discouraging ML applications, from unexciting, insufficiently demanding, intellectual or relevant A Level or degree course content, to insufficient numbers of sufficiently qualified A Level candidates for language degree study at University. Motivations for language study are diverse, ranging from languages as a way of accessing history, culture, politics and literature or area studies, to languages as a training for translation or interpreting, as a subject of study in

themselves, or as a pathway to postgraduate study or a profession in, say, politics or international relations, business or diplomacy.

- Student motivation and school and university curricula might therefore need to be reconsidered, asking whether current diversity is fit for purpose or its rationale sufficiently clear to potential students. There may be a need for more hybrid courses with other academic and vocational subjects, involving year-abroad or other sandwich internships, in order to improve *ab initio* student confidence and preparedness for work. There may also be a need for more ML and/or hybrid courses, in order to address both the dearth of language-qualified A Level candidates for language degrees, and perceived employment need for graduates with facility in two or more languages as well as English.
- The position and teaching of languages may need particular consideration within this wider course review. Should there be more provision for online/IT language learning, more collaboration between universities (and schools?) which were geographically close for teaching? Better information on university language courses might help address regional inequities in language study in schools. But any reform should be pedagogically rather than financially driven; would need to take account of the heavy costs of teaching (and studying) modern languages at university; and to solve the problem of inter-institutional competition which is currently inimical to collaboration.
- Any review of the position and teaching of languages should involve reconsideration of the institutional status, career paths and pay grades of dedicated professional university language teachers in the face of the perceived retreat of traditional UK languages academics (often literature or cultural history scholars) from hands-on language teaching. The relationship between traditional language- (in fact, often literature-) and practical language teaching is at the heart of modern languages, and must be at the centre of any consideration of language degree course definition, delivery, and communication.
- Finally, there is a need to re-examine and reassert the diversity and life-changing value of studying and using languages, and to place them at the centre of education, culture and the economy; to see them as including, but not subsumed by, other key subjects; and to make the case for replacing STEM with STLAM: Science, Technology, Languages and Maths.

Policy

Summary of Chair’s Introduction

We are at a critical moment for language education in the UK, but a long policy history precedes the current situation, a history which many attending the colloquium would have witnessed first-hand. There have been many changes in schools, and in language policy more generally, many of which have been quite innovative, such as the introduction of the national curriculum. Nevertheless, in recent decades we have witnessed a trend of long-term decline in the subject, which has been compounded by problems of teacher recruitment, the detrimental impact of league tables, and a diminution of the status of languages within schools (particularly those in areas of the highest socio-economic deprivation). The result has been that too often we are left with disaffected learners and disaffected teachers in language classrooms. At a policy level, the dual issues of capacity and of content need to be reassessed by government in a joined-up manner.

Summary of Discussion

The discussion was wide-ranging, touching on a number of different areas, from government, to teacher recruitment and training, curriculum, and the breadth of language provision. Many of the key themes here are those also brought up in the other two working groups.

There was a great deal of discussion about the perceived motivations for promoting and studying modern languages, both students’ own motivations, and the motivations of government and policy-makers. A full understanding of what motivates students is absolutely vital to solving the problems that MFL is facing. The observation was made that there has been a tendency to promote languages in terms of their vocational utility, but that these motivations are not always sufficiently convincing, especially when ‘competing’ with highly attractive business-related subjects. The point was made that more could be done to ignite an interest in languages amongst students whose interests might lie primarily with STEM – and more could be done to foster the notion that MFL and STEM are compatible and indeed complementary. Furthermore, there is a clear rationale for this in terms of employability: there is an increasing expectation on the part of employers that graduates are able to speak more than one language, which is putting monolingual English speakers at a disadvantage. Mention was made of the acronym ‘STEAM’ (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) or even, as one delegate proposed in the plenary, ‘SLAM’ (Science, Languages, Arts, Mathematics”).

A large part of the discussion also focused on the importance of ‘niche’ or community languages (some of which, in fact, can barely be described as ‘niche’: Arabic, for instance, is an official language in 27 countries, with over 400 million native speakers!). Aside from the intrinsic value of the cultural enrichment which comes from cultural and linguistic understanding, there are also clear implications to a country’s language policy in terms of trade, defence, security, and so on. However, these are not always easy to predict. The example of Arabic was raised in the working group: after 9/11, Arabic experienced a sudden and sharp increase in government spending in the UK, having previously been a low priority. In spite of this, the recent proposed dropping of the A Level in Arabic (and other lesser-taught languages, such as Greek, Turkish and Portuguese) by examination boards was seen as a serious problem in need of urgent attention. Whilst recent moves from government on this particular issue have been positive, it needs to be ensured that qualifications in languages such as these remain secure, viable, and of a recognised standing. It was suggested that there should be much more cooperation and sharing of teachers and resources between schools with respect to lesser-taught languages, so that pupils are able to take advantage of local expertise in a much broader range of languages. This could take the form of a school ‘twinning’ system, or perhaps a system run at a borough- or council-wide level.

Attention was also given to languages in primary schools: in England this is particularly important given the recent introduction of compulsory language learning at KS2, but is also crucial in a more general sense, as the earlier that languages are taught, the more entrenched they become, and the more progress young people are able to make. The example of Scotland’s ‘1+2’ policy (mother tongue plus two additional languages) was cited as an example, one which has resulted in a significant increase in languages in Scottish schools. It was observed in the working group that the languages introduced in primary schools in Scotland have included lesser-taught languages such as Polish or Czech, in addition to the ‘main’ European languages. However, in order for such a programme to be successful in England, sufficient investment and training for teachers is required from the government: it needs to be ensured that schools are properly equipped for this increased provision, and that provision is of a sufficiently high quality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Above all, there is a need for a ‘joined-up’ government approach, with a recognition that language policy made in one area of government affects other areas. Policy-making should not be formed in ‘silos’, but should be joined up between departments, and between government and language communities, schools, and universities. There needs to be a coherent pathway through primary and secondary schools to universities. Currently, the fact that responsibility for schools and universities lie in different government departments does not encourage such joined-up decision-making
- There is a problem in the government’s perception of language and bilingualism: there is too much emphasis on English, to the detriment of other languages. Of course English is important, but we must not lose sight of the importance of other languages, in terms of trade and defence, for instance, but also as a general, enriching skill
- We need to avoid false dichotomies in decision-making, for example between science and language. These subject areas are complementary and skills developed in each subject area can enhance the other
- There needs to be a clear, viable and credible assessment system for lesser-taught languages: whether or not these languages are assessed within the same system as the more commonly-taught languages (given that there are practical problems which cannot be ignored), they must have parity with these languages
- A renewed focus on teacher CPD and building confidence is necessary, and is well worth investing in. Linked to this is a need to ensure a greater number of quality language teachers, and ensure that CPD supports those who wish to teach in schools
- Finally, more curriculum time for languages is needed if results are to improve

Report compiled in October 2015 by Matt Garraghan for the London Centre for Languages and Cultures, from notes by working group chairs Bernardette Holmes, Dr Tim Farrant, and Pam Haezwindt, with thanks also to those scribing proceedings in each of the sessions.