

The British Academy

The Languages Review

Introduction

1. The British Academy works to promote the interests of scholarship and research in the humanities and social sciences, and is composed of eminent scholars who are elected to its Fellowship on the basis of their scholarly standing and achievement. As an independent voice for both the humanities and social sciences, the Academy is well placed to comment on how current language policy is affecting the health of these disciplines.

Summary

2. Language training and take-up at GCSE and beyond in secondary schools is inadequate to support the development of high-level graduate studies and academic research in the humanities and social sciences. Research in all subjects is becoming increasingly insular in outlook, because PhD students do not have language skills, or the time to acquire them. Fewer language students at GCSE means fewer students at A-level and degree level, with a potentially extremely damaging effect on the supply not only of secondary and primary school teachers but also of HE researchers. The Academy therefore welcomes many of the proposals in Lord Dearing's preliminary report, including:
 - its recognition that urgent short-term action is needed. The Academy favours a return to mandatory language study at GCSE, but, if present circumstances make this impractical in the short-term, schools should be required to set language performance targets for themselves that are linked to incentives and sanctions.
 - the recommendation to make languages a mandatory discipline at primary level.
 - the importance of enabling schools to respond to changing national and regional needs, with a more diversified range of languages on offer.
 - the development of educationally sound curricula.
3. In addition, the Academy recommends that Lord Dearing's review should consider:
 - the recommendation made by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in 2000 that: "There is an urgent need for a national strategy to plan the range of languages taught in higher education, to manage the integration of languages into all subject areas and to maintain a sufficient supply of language specialists."
 - the role that HEIs can play both in incentivising language learning and in promoting and supporting language teaching.
 - the pursuit of present policies on curriculum reform, which embrace both communication and structure.

Responses to the consultation questions

PRIMARY

Qu 1. We propose that language learning should be embedded in the National Curriculum for primary schools in the next review of the primary curriculum, based on a well founded understanding of what content and approach to language learning is most suitable for children in primary schools, and how best to build on that at Key Stage 3. In saying this we recognise that there will have to be some compensating adjustments to the primary curriculum elsewhere. (para 7.7) Do you agree?

4. Agree. There is much evidence to suggest that it is not only easier for pupils to learn languages at this age, but that it also helps them to develop skills in their first language. "Other compelling reasons for an early start are that this makes more time overall, it makes it more possible to introduce other languages subsequently, and it fosters underlying qualities such as a child's literacy, language awareness, and personal development (social, emotional, psychomotor and cognitive). It provides a formative educational experience which will encourage children to shape their own plurilingual and multicultural identity as befits the modern world in which they already live." (*Addressing 'The Age Factor': Some implications for languages policy*, R Johnstone, 2002). These benefits are recognised by most EC countries, which insist that language learning should be statutory at primary level. For example, in France modern foreign (or regional) languages are a mandatory discipline at primary level, and every pupil entering secondary school has to learn another language in addition to the one studied at primary level.

Qu. 2 We propose that over time primary schools should be enabled, with the help of specialist language schools and local secondary schools, to offer some choice in the language learnt. (para 7.4) Do you agree?

5. Agree. Offering a choice of languages is an important means of encouraging pupils to learn languages. However, it is difficult to see how this can be achieved if action is not taken to address the current crisis in the supply of language teachers, which has its roots in the decline in pupils taking languages at GCSE and beyond. Fewer pupils taking languages at GCSE results in fewer students at A-level and degree level, which in turn has an adverse effect on the supply of future language teachers and researchers in fields of enquiry that rely on languages.
6. Incentives should also be put in place to ensure that there is not a mismatch between the languages offered by secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. Findings from an evaluation of progress in ten Pathfinder LEAs (*Implementing languages entitlement in primary schools*, OFSTED, 2005) showed that "primary-secondary patterns of transfer were complex and pupils could not necessarily continue immediately in Year 7 with a language studied in Year 6. Most secondary schools took pupils from a wide range of primary schools, and were unable to adjust the language on offer to provide continuity in a specific language." Primary and secondary schools should be actively encouraged to work together, in order to ensure that this problem does not occur. In the short term, financial incentives should be available to primary

and secondary schools, to help develop the close working relationships and linkages that will be required to manage the transition from primary to secondary.

Qu 3. We propose that the provision for teacher support in primary schools should be continued and where necessary extended at least until 2010. (para 7.2) Do you agree?

7. Agree. The British Academy considers that the objective should be to have at least one language teacher in each primary school. A study commissioned by the DFES in 2004 on primary language provision highlighted the importance placed by primary schools on having language teachers on their staff, especially because the level of language proficiency among primary school teachers was often rather limited. The study found that the majority of primary teachers who reported any qualification (at 25 per cent) “did so for French, with GCSE or equivalent being the most common qualification.” Given that there are 17,504 primary schools, the current strategy to recruit 6,000 language teachers for primary schools needs to be expanded accordingly. Alternatively, consideration should be given to ways in which primary schools can work together in small consortia, in order to share the resource of a qualified primary language teacher.

Qu 4. We propose that there should be non-statutory formative classroom assessment at the end of Key Stage 2, using the language ladder to facilitate continuous progression in learning from primary to secondary school, and thus avoid the frustration and regression that can occur when the move takes place. We have no wish for this to form the basis of any league table: the purpose is formative. (para 7.6) Do you agree.

8. Agree. While we can see that it can be a means of assisting the progression from primary to secondary, the main purpose of formative assessment is to help and motivate the pupil – not to enable providers to judge them.

SECONDARY

Qu 5. In addition to a new Key Stage 3 curriculum which is on the stocks, we say a new specification for the GCSE is urgently needed. (para 7.15) Do you agree?

9. Agree. We welcome the report’s recognition that the level descriptors in both the curriculum and the specification for the GCSE should align with the Languages Ladder. The GCSE should also be an extension of the principles already in place at KS3 and KS2 in which pupils deepen their understanding of language and of how to learn future languages. It should challenge the bright, give a satisfying sense of progression to the average and provide an achievable minimum to the weak.

Qu 6 We propose that the assessment of speaking and listening in the GCSE is changed to make it less personally stressful and hence a more reliable test of a candidate’s capability. Moderated teacher assessment over a short period would be a better way. (para 7.28) Do you agree?

10. Neither agree nor disagree. It is not clear how this proposal relates to the Language Ladder.

Qu 7. We propose that the Languages Ladder (Asset Languages) is now promoted for general use by schools. It will provide an important opportunity to recognise progress for learners from the primary years through to A Levels and beyond. (para 7.30) Do you agree?

11. Agree. The Languages Ladder is a finely-tuned means of giving credit for language learning in particular skills, as well as providing an opportunity for learners to assess their own levels of language competence.

Qu. 8. We propose that the current regulations on language provision are withdrawn and that schools should be able to offer one or more languages based on clear non-statutory guidance from the Department. (para 7.38) Do you agree?

12. Agree. The British Academy welcomes the report's recognition of the increasing importance of languages such as Chinese and other Eastern languages, along with other major community languages, having a more secure place within the curriculum. The Academy supports the proposal that the current regulations on eligible languages should be withdrawn, in order to give schools the ability to respond to changing national and regional needs, and encourage a more diversified range of languages on offer.

Qu 9. We propose that schools should also be encouraged to value and wherever possible make provision for some learning of the languages of their local communities and to reflect those languages and cultures in the curriculum. This can be a powerful way of involving parents in the educational process. (para 7.5) Do you agree?

13. Agree. This can be an important means of encouraging take-up of languages, as well as fostering greater understanding of these other cultures in the community. Pupils may well be motivated by the fact that some of their peers speak these languages naturally. Consideration should be given to the ways in which we can develop longer-term strategies that will take account of the considerable language skills of immigrant families. For example, in some of the larger cities the study of Arabic or Urdu by non-Asian pupils could make a major contribution to better understanding. Findings from research studies show that two key strategies for promoting greater cross-cultural awareness flow from "1) encouraging speakers of [minority] languages to maintain their self-esteem and their commitment to using these languages while at the same time participating in the 'majority language' community, and 2) encouraging children from the 'majority language' community to gain an experience and an understanding of the value which these so-called 'minority' languages and their communities of speakers bring to the wider society." (R Johnstone, 2002).

Qu 10. There has been a long, sustained argument that the standards for the awards of grades are more demanding than for other subjects, and that this has contributed to the flight from languages, both because of the concern of students to get good grades and the concern of schools to do well in the 5 A to C achievement and attainment tables. We propose that it is resolved. (para 7.27) Do you agree?*

14. Agree. We are aware that there are conflicting views about the difficulty of obtaining a good grade in a modern foreign language at GCSE, and agree that robust evidence should be obtained in order to help resolve this question.

Qu 11. We propose that the DFES should make a study of the use of the Secretary of State's powers of direction to require schools to set performance targets for languages and consider guidance to governing bodies. (para 8.17) Do you agree?

15. Agree. The Academy agrees that language performance targets for schools (rather than pupils) should be a requirement, because it is clear that the Government's request that schools set a target of between 50% and 90% of pupils studying a language has been largely ignored: 'although 73% of maintained schools which responded to the survey are aware of the Government's requirement to set a benchmark...only 17% have done so. In schools where less than a quarter of students study a language at KS4, only 5% have set a benchmark.' (Findings from *Language Trends 2006: Languages in Key Stage 4*, CILT, November 2006). It is clear that the majority of schools will only take these benchmarks seriously if they are linked to incentives and sanctions.
16. Another, and perhaps more effective, pressure on defaulting schools would be to attract OFSTED attention. This would have the advantage of being able to apply pressure where it will be most effective, on the head teacher. *Language Trends 2006* found that the most important determinant of success in languages was the attitude of top management.

TEACHERS

Qu. 12. We propose that action should be taken to arrest the continuing loss of qualified teachers. (para 7.13) Do you agree?

17. Disagree. The Academy is concerned about the proposal to reassign secondary language teachers to primary schools. It risks deepening the current shortage of secondary language teachers, and does not address the problem that secondary schools are currently letting go their language teachers because take-up of language GCSE qualifications and beyond is so low. Rather, the focus should be on finding ways to incentivise secondary schools to maintain their complement of language teachers. A principal way of doing this is to insist that secondary schools should be required to adhere to the Secretary of State's expectation that they should set a performance target of the number of pupils studying a language (see answer to Qu 11). The Academy also believes that universities should be encouraged to explore the possibility of offering language degrees with a curriculum oriented towards teaching (see answer to Qu. 14 (b)).

Qu. 13. We propose that sufficient provision should be made for the continuing professional development of language teachers in secondary schools. (para 7.11) Do you agree?

18. Agree. This is clearly important and should also include training in primary methodologies for teaching and learning at KS2.

Other.

14(a) Do you agree the Consultation Report sets out the fundamental issues relating to MFL learning and take up?

19. NO.

14 (b) *If No, what issues should we consider?*

20. Syllabus and content. The Academy considers it important that the syllabus should embrace both communication and structure. Pupils enjoy learning grammar and exploring the ways in which they can construct and deconstruct a language, as is evidenced by the popularity of A-level English Language. An analysis of A-level entries in French and German since 1988 shows that languages had been popular, with steadily rising numbers of entries to 1993: the year when they started to fall. In the Academy's view, A-level numbers declined as the focus on structure decreased with the introduction of purely communicative methods. The Academy welcomes the introduction of the revised national curriculum for foreign languages in 1999, which corrected the imbalance between communicative and grammar-translation methods by increasing the focus on the study of language structure, and urges that the Dearing review recommend that the present policies on curriculum reform, which embrace both communication and structure, should be pursued, but even more strongly.
21. A national strategy for higher education. The future health and well-being of language teaching and learning is dependent upon the availability of teachers. The recruitment and training of teachers is currently a major problem, and is likely to become even more extreme as more and more university language departments are being forced to close in response to the marked decline in the numbers undertaking specialist language degrees. At a time when many other subjects have in general witnessed a marked increase in applications for first degrees, applications for language degrees have been declining at a rate of 4 to 5% annually over the last decade (*A new landscape for languages*, Kelly and Jones, 2003). While the Academy welcomes the work that is currently being undertaken by HEFCE and others in response to the problem, it considers that more needs to be done to address the current crisis which threatens to jeopardise efforts to increase the take-up of languages at GCSE and beyond. The Academy supports a recommendation made by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in its report published in 2000 that: "There is an urgent need for a national strategy to plan the range of languages taught in higher education, to manage the integration of languages into all subject areas and to maintain a sufficient supply of language specialists." We recognise that this issue falls outside the immediate scope of the Dearing review, but hope that Lord Dearing will consider drawing this concern to the attention of the Education Secretary of State.
22. The role of HEIs in incentivising language learning. The Academy is also concerned that HEIs could do more to promote language learning as a key skill for students studying non-language degrees. There has been an erosion in recent years of the expectation at many universities that students of subjects other than languages have command of any languages, including students of history or philosophy. As a result, subjects such as French History and German Philosophy, for example, are largely or exclusively taught through translation. In addition, the proportion of research projects undertaken by PhD students in

the humanities and social sciences that do not have an international dimension are growing, because students do not have the language skills, or the time to acquire them, leading to research that is increasingly insular in outlook. For instance, the ESRC reported in 2003 that only 6 per cent of its UK domiciled postgraduate research award-holders were undertaking a project with an international dimension, requiring fieldwork abroad. While students may be encouraged to take optional language classes in their own time, they may not receive any credit for it. This may all help to contribute to the perception that languages are not important.

23. The Academy believes that HEIs should play a greater role in incentivising pupils to study languages. Universities can send a powerful message to schools, pupils and parents about the importance of language. The Academy considers that a language requirement should be a requisite for university entrance, and commends the decision taken in December 2006 by one research-intensive university that in the future all its applicants (regardless of discipline) should have a GCSE qualification (or equivalent) in a modern foreign language. It believes that other research-intensive universities, working together and thus avoiding competitive pressures, should take a lead on behalf of the UK's national interest and should revise their matriculation requirements accordingly, and, following consultation with schools on appropriate lead-in times, determine the year when this requirement should be introduced. There should be an element of flexibility with regard to this matriculation requirement, so that universities can consider alternative evidence of skills in another language, e.g. pupils having a different home language without a formal qualification, or whether a case for exemption exists. We consider that 'require but be flexible' satisfies access needs. In this way, pupils who intend to go to university but would otherwise have been deterred from language study, will be incentivised to take-up language learning. This initiative would have most impact on the state maintained sector, where GCSE entries are low in comparison with the independent sector.
24. The promotion and support of language teaching. The Academy is concerned that university language departments may not have done enough in the past to promote school teaching as a possible career for their students. It is also concerned that specialist language degrees may be placing too high an emphasis on the study of literature and culture at the expense of language structure. University language departments should consider whether their curricula need rebalancing, in order to embrace language structure, along with literature and culture. This would also serve as a useful preparation for future language teachers. As the shortage of language teachers has helped fuel the crisis in languages, consideration should also be given to other ways in which language teaching might be promoted. The Academy is aware of a recommendation made by Kelly and Jones (*A new landscape for languages*, 2003) that "one way the shortage might be combatted is for specialist language courses to be developed with a stronger orientation towards a future teaching career ...[and] develop curriculum content and marketing strategies that target potential teachers."

A return to mandatory requirement is not our preferred course, but if it were to be made, do you think it should be qualified by (please tick all preferred options)

Pupils having a choice of courses. Yes

The availability of teachers. Yes

Students at level 4 or below in English or Maths (or both) at the end of KS3 not being subject to compulsion Yes

The implications of the new specialised diplomas where languages are being seen as an option, not a requirement.

25. The British Academy believes that languages are a key skill alongside literacy, numeracy and ICT. The UK's ability to compete in the globalised economy will be extremely restricted if its citizens continue to lack language skills. We favour a return to compulsion at GCSE, but consider that, if present circumstances such as teacher availability make a mandatory requirement impractical in the short-term, it should be retained as a long-term goal. Mandatory status also reinforces the perception that languages are important: pupils are well aware that if something is important they will be required to do it.

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