
Languages Matter

Professor Marian Hobson FBA *reports on the various activities the Academy is undertaking to draw attention to the crisis in language learning.*

THERE HAS been a sharp decline in the number of pupils in England taking a GCSE qualification in a modern language. These numbers have been falling since 2001 even when a language GCSE was compulsory. This decline was exacerbated by the Government's decision to make language learning optional from 2004 onwards for pupils aged 14+: in the period from 2004 to 2006, the proportion of all pupils taking a language at GCSE fell from 68 to 51 per cent. Similarly, A2 level entries for languages have declined since 1996. As a result, the proportion of pupils taking French at A2 level has fallen from 10.4% in 1996 to 4.7% in 2006; and the comparable figures for German are 4.3% to 2.1%.

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 higher education researchers. Secondary schools are letting their language teachers go, or are not filling vacancies as they arise; and an increasing number of language departments at universities and colleges are being closed. The results damage the provision of language-based degrees. Potentially more serious will be the concomitant decline in the standard to which many other university subjects in the humanities and social sciences, including history, literature, and many aspects of social and economic inquiry, can be studied. Moreover, the decline in languages also affects the science base, as significant scientific research is conducted and published in languages other than English, and thus undermines the ability of UK scientists to participate in large-scale international

collaborative projects. The Government's decision to make language learning optional for pupils aged 14+ has not only damaged life and work opportunities for many pupils, but also threatens the UK's ability to compete effectively in a global market, and UK research risks becoming increasingly insular in outlook.

The British Academy has on various occasions publicly expressed its concerns about these developments – the most recent being its response to the Government's Review of its Language Strategy which was chaired by Lord Dearing (see www.britac.ac.uk/reports/). Lord Dearing's Review was asked to examine what could be done to encourage pupils to study GCSE or other language courses leading to a recognised qualification. His final report was published in March 2007. Many of the

Academy's recommendations were accepted by Lord Dearing's Review, such as better curricula and examinations, mandatory language learning at primary level, and requiring schools to set performance targets for languages which should be subject to OFSTED review. While Lord Dearing's recommendations are welcome, the Academy fears that they are not sufficient to address the current crisis.

The Government appears to believe that making language learning mandatory at primary school (to be phased in by 2010) will be the quick fix to the crisis we currently face. There are many good reasons why pupils should learn languages at a young age: it not only makes it easier for them to learn a language, but also helps develop skills in their first language, and research findings show that it also brings cognitive and social benefits. These benefits have been recognised for some time by most EC countries, which insist that language learning should be statutory at primary level. The problem with the UK policy is that there is no mandatory continuation into, nor even mandatory correlation with, secondary school education. The fact that secondary schools take pupils from a wide range of primary feeder schools makes it extremely difficult to manage the transition, because there is likely to be a mismatch between the languages offered at primary and secondary level. Pupils may find that they cannot continue the language they studied at primary school, or that they have to mark time while beginners in that language reach their level of attainment. We fear this will have a damaging affect on pupils' morale and their enjoyment of language study. It is a far from efficient use of resources.

While the Government accepts that the recruitment and training of sufficient language teachers to meet the UK's needs is currently a problem, it does not seem to have addressed the fact that the problem is likely to become even more extreme as more and more university language departments are forced to close in response to a the marked decline in the numbers undertaking specialist language degrees. The future health and well-being of language teaching and learning at all levels is dependent upon the availability of teachers. The actions being undertaken, including the introduction of a mandatory

requirement at primary level, will take time to bear fruit and it is already clear that they are not enough on their own to address the crisis in the long-term. In the meantime, a whole generation will be lost to languages, exacerbating the recruitment difficulties that languages are already experiencing, and leading to even greater shortfalls in the number of undergraduates, postgraduates, academic staff and teachers. The crying need for a "joined up" policy on languages has simply not been met.

The Academy flagged these concerns by organising a public discussion, held on 14 May 2007, to be the first of several. The speakers at the discussion were: Haun Saussy, Professor of Chinese at Yale (a specialist, among other things, of Chinese poetry), and a member of the recent US Modern Languages Association committee report on languages in the US (www.mla.org/mlaissuesmajor); Mike Kelly, Professor of French at Southampton, Director for the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, co-author of the Nuffield report on Languages and Director of the new HEFCE funded programme, Routes into Languages, which aims to increase the take-up of languages by developing greater cooperation between schools and universities; Richard Hudson, Professor of Linguistics in the University of London, at UCL, who works in linguistics but is also a specialist of the Cushitic language of the north-east Sudan. I chaired the meeting, which attracted a diverse audience, including Lord Dearing and Dr Lid King (the DfES National Director of Languages), along with representatives from interested bodies (such as the Cabinet Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

The meeting generated a lively discussion, and identified the following causes for concern:

- the lead time from the introduction of languages in primary school. This, where it has started, seems to be going on pretty well. But it will be a good while, some five or six years, before these children move into secondary school. How is their language knowledge to be maintained once they move? Is this being dovetailed into what goes on in secondary school, when schools are often short of money? Are the languages learned in primary and

available at the secondary school even being coordinated?

- the view that languages are mere tools – They are far more. They are deeply connected with the way we handle our own experience, and approach others, especially other nations. To understand "where someone is coming from" as modern slang rather profoundly has it, is to understand something of how that person sees things, and this is at least partially mediated through their language. Languages can be spectacularly different in the way they convey meaning (News International and its recent summons for libel in France over an article written in London is a case in point).
- recognizing the value of the linguistic diversity in our country seriously is extremely important. Recognizing it as a feature of the world that isn't going to go away would be another, crucial step which could be taken by building languages into the secondary school curriculum securely – Gujarati, URDU and Sinhala are foreign languages, after all, and GCSEs can be taken in them.
- another problem is that we extrapolate from the fact that English is an international language. Everyone speaks English, don't they? Well no: courtesy of a Ceylonese computing firm, which works in several languages and several scripts, some figures were obtained: "Generally it was estimated by Unesco that only about 40% of the www content was in English in 2003; however it is thought that this number has now dropped to 35%, but this time measuring the number of users, rather than web-sites." (with thanks to Chanuka Wategama, who used Wikipedia with some hesitation for the last estimation).
- a major problem will be to reap fully the benefits of learning languages at primary school. 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 University College London (UCL) that in the future all its applicants (regardless

of discipline) should have a GCSE qualification (or equivalent) in a modern foreign language. Universities must follow the lead of UCL and the main US universities, and make study of languages beyond primary school an absolute requirement for university entrance, in the same way maths is. In yet other words, part of the gateway into tertiary education. Otherwise the innovation in languages that is taking place in primary schools will not be carried through into secondary school, and will thus prove to have been an expensive blind alley.

- perhaps the most subtle concern voiced about the nation-wider loss of language expertise was the loss of the ability to understand what in another point of view is not spelled out merely in words but

conveyed in very various modes – for instance in some languages by a body language that has to be learned. This implied meaning is generated in every language by cultural expectations as much as by verbal language. These expectations may be totally specific to the language and yet need to be understood if potentially dangerous misapprehensions are not to occur.

The British Academy is exploring ways in which it can keep the debate about the crisis of language learning at the forefront of public concern. It is currently considering the possibility of setting up a policy study, which could form the springboard for a campaign and a series of associated events and conferences, possibly held in partnership with sister academies from overseas, to keep

the momentum going and highlight the urgency for languages. As part of this work, it will be holding a brainstorming meeting in mid-November 2007, in order to identify the ways in which the Academy can make a distinctive contribution to the debate, and focus on the areas where the Academy can say things with authority, and have an influence.

The British Academy's statements in response to the Government's Dearing Review of Language Learning are available at www.britac.ac.uk/reports/dearing-2006
