

LOST FOR WORDS

The Need for Languages in
UK Diplomacy and Security

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**



**BRITISH
ACADEMY**

for the humanities and social sciences

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Foreword

Learning and speaking languages has long been a crucial aspect of the British diplomatic tradition: languages are a critical tool through which UK diplomats and external-facing staff in other government departments can deepen their knowledge and build the trust that is necessary to promote and protect British values and interests internationally. As the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, recently stated: *“Diplomacy is the art of understanding different cultures, and using this understanding to predict and influence behaviour. Speaking the local language is the essential first step in this process.”*

In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, language skills are gaining rather than losing their relevance. The Government needs to develop and demonstrate its understanding of foreign countries, their histories, ambitions, cultures, and political systems in order to drive UK diplomatic excellence and maintain national security.

Twenty-seven years ago, the Parker Report, *Speaking for the Future*, highlighted the need for Britain to maintain high quality centres of language teaching so that employees of British Government services, NGOs, media outlets and businesses would be equipped with sufficient cultural and linguistic expertise to interact successfully with foreign partners. This British Academy report, *Lost for Words*, is a first step towards understanding the current level of foreign language capacity among the departments and agencies that constitute the front line of UK diplomacy and security.

The report showcases some encouraging developments – both within government and language education – to ensure we have the linguistic capacity to maintain an influential voice on a global stage. The report also demonstrates, however, persistent deficits in foreign language skills that threaten our future capacity for influence. And it reveals the

challenges that prevent the government and higher education institutions from bridging the language supply system to the diplomatic and security front line. The report concludes that there is much more to be done. If steps are not taken to reverse the current declining trend in language skills, Britain may indeed be in danger of becoming 'lost for words'.

The production of this report required extensive research and review, including input from key users and suppliers of languages in public policy. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in its production for their hard work – particularly the authors, Anne Breivik and Selina Chen. We are very grateful to the several higher education institutions, government representatives and experts for providing us with the evidence for this inquiry. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow members of the Steering Group for their commitment to the project: Sir Ivor Roberts; Professor Clive Holes FBA; Professor Dame Helen Wallace FBA; Professor Graham Furniss FBA and Rear Admiral Simon Lister.

We hope that this report will serve as a useful platform for a thorough review in the near future of the options available to government and the education sector to overcome the challenges we have highlighted and to take up the broad directions for policy that we have offered.



Dr Robin Niblett

Director, Chatham House
Chair, Lost for Words Inquiry



Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in Security and Diplomacy

1. The ability to speak a foreign language is a key element in the formation of relationships, mutual cultural understanding, trust and networks that facilitate interaction and cooperation across borders and societies. The radically different landscape of international engagement and security that confronts Britain today means that language skills can no longer be regarded simply as an optional adjunct to those other skills needed by government employees working in outward-facing roles. Economic, technological, geopolitical and societal shifts over the last few decades mean that language skills for diplomacy and national security are now needed across a growing number of government departments. This in turn creates a premium for skills in a range of languages that are considered harder to acquire for speakers whose first language is English. How well-equipped a society and its government are in terms of languages skills should be regarded as a key indicator of how prepared they are to operate effectively within the fast-changing landscape of global engagement.
2. Traditionally, foreign language skills within government have been viewed as essential for diplomacy, national security and defence. However, the decline in language capacity over the last few years within certain areas of government has raised concern about our future capabilities. If steps are not taken to reverse the current decline in language skills, Britain may be in danger of becoming 'lost for words'.
3. The British Academy has longstanding concerns about the growing deficit in language skills within the United Kingdom.

To our knowledge, there has never been a systematic review that examines how language capacity within the UK affects the Government's ability to maintain diplomatic relations and deliver national security and defence. Therefore, this inquiry focuses on the current standing of foreign language skills within the UK Government. Specifically, it seeks to gain a better understanding of:

- the Government's current capacity for foreign languages;
 - how this capacity serves the UK's public policy objectives in international relations and security; and
 - how the Government's current and future capacity can be supported by wider language learning.
4. This report draws on a formal consultation process, extensive desk research and informal interviews with a range of stakeholders. In providing this preliminary overview, the report paves the way for further research and action, contributing to the case for a sustainable and strategically informed approach to the development and maintenance of language capacity in the UK.

Key findings

5. Language needs and the value of language skills

- Every government department and agency consulted for this inquiry acknowledged that language skills have important benefits in enabling them to meet their objectives. However, government departments do not currently accord language skills the importance that the evidence indicates is necessary.
- Many government departments and agencies believe they can currently 'do the job' – though perhaps not as well – without language skills. While language skills frequently complement other important skills, and need not be essential in their own right, the rather lukewarm message such a response conveys is that languages are important but optional.
- There are, however, signs of growing acknowledgement of the need and importance of languages amongst the departments consulted. It is clear that the lack of language skills among British officials and armed forces is both embarrassing and

risks putting the UK at a competitive disadvantage. It was also acknowledged that cultural and linguistic skills will become increasingly important in the future. The newly established FCO Language Centre and the Defence School of Languages and Culture are potential beacons of commitment to language learning across government.

6. Early and long term investment strategies

- Language learning is resource-intensive and it is clear that many departments would ideally want these skills to be accessible on demand. The procurement of language skills differs across departments with some, such as the Secret Intelligence Agencies, providing long-term investment in language training, while others make extensive use of contractors and interpreters on an ad hoc basis.
- Some departments have taken steps to conserve and build on their investment in language training, through: maintaining databases of language skills, cross-agency skill sharing, retraining and refreshment opportunities, and investment in training and conservation of language-teaching expertise. However, more could be done, and in a more uniform way, to get better value from investment in language training without incurring excessive structural inflexibility.
- There are significant knock-on effects to the supply chain. Language scholarship is a long-term investment and should therefore not simply be regarded solely as the responsibility of the immediate employer. Rather, the problem needs to be tackled in the round.

7. Growing use of native speakers

- It is clear that, across departments, existing language resources could be better utilised. Although there is a general awareness of the dividends arising from this aspect of multiculturalism, with native speakers used by many departments, not enough is done to encourage or develop the skills of native or heritage speakers at the school level. The UK has a diverse population that provides a valuable pool of language resources, particularly for languages that are not commonly taught in schools.

- Greater efforts could be made to reach out to native speakers working elsewhere within the wider Civil Service workforce, encouraging them to feel valued for their skills and to volunteer information about their spoken languages. An engagement strategy of this kind could enable greater integration and allow government departments, particularly Home Office agencies, to reach into closed communities, potentially producing positive effects for community engagement and the prevention of terrorism.

8. Career progression and incentives

- This inquiry has found that not only are there insufficient incentives to encourage language learning, but there are also, in some cases, longstanding career disincentives to doing so. The perceived stigma attached to language learning remains an issue, despite the existence of various financial incentives to boost its professional profile.
- Language skills and expertise are currently not an explicit part of the job appraisal process for key government departments. Language skills need to be incorporated into appraisals and job descriptions, as a way of giving recognition to their worth and of ensuring that language skills are afforded greater prominence in performance review systems.

9. Cross-departmental collaboration and a strategic approach

- The approach to identifying language requirements appears to be decentralised, not very strategically informed, and somewhat opaque across the relevant parts of government. There appears to be little co-ordination across government to identify current language needs and no overall strategic approach to enable future needs to be met.
- It is encouraging, however, that despite differing language needs, pressures on budgets are leading to some forms of increased collaboration. The FCO's Language Centre, for example, provides a significant opportunity for pooling resources, which should be made systematically available to the staff of other government departments and agencies.

10. Sustaining language capacity

- The report also sets the above findings within the context of the wider infrastructure supporting language learning within schools and universities in the UK. The report concludes that the needs of government departments and agencies are not met by current university provision. Not only is there a general lack of appreciation and awareness by the departments regarding existing expertise within higher education institutions HEIs but, within HEIs themselves, there has been a marked decline in provision of many of the languages which have strategic importance for defence and diplomacy.
- The fragility of provision for language learning within HEIs cannot be overestimated, and the new funding regime for higher education, introduced in 2012, provides a very different landscape that universities will have to navigate if language studies are to flourish. In the area of lesser-taught or minority languages, student demand is unlikely ever to reach levels that make such provision economically self-sustaining. Declining provision for the study of lesser-taught and minority languages poses a threat to the pool of UK expertise in these areas. However, universities are now exploring different ways to expand their language provision, in some cases by targeting such courses towards vocational ends and expanding joint degree offerings.

Conclusion

11. The current apathy towards language skills across government and the perception that they may in fact be detrimental to an individual's career development and advancement are particularly worrying. These concerns need to be addressed through the establishment of clear policies, strong leadership and significant incentives which recognise and support language learning across the board.
12. It is also clear that the government will not be able to sustain or increase its language capacity without addressing the issue of diminishing supply. Government needs to work closely with all parts of the education system to develop policies that provide a consistent pathway for language learners from primary to tertiary levels. HEIs also need to be engaged to ensure that, where

language capacity and expertise in strategically important, lesser-taught minority languages exists, it is supported and maintained.

13. Ultimately, if no action is taken, language skills within government will continue to erode until there are neither the skills within government nor enough new linguists coming through the education system to rebuild its capacity and meet the security, defence, and diplomacy requirements of the UK. It is clear that these needs can no longer be sustained by individual initiatives within specific sectors. A strategic and consistent policy for languages needs to be developed across government, which addresses the supply, recruitment and development of individuals with language skills.

Main recommendations

- There needs to be a cross-government strategy for language capacity that identifies the language capabilities and requirements of government, and supports the development of these skills.
- This long-term plan needs to:
 - include a regular audit of language capabilities,
 - identify resource sharing opportunities,
 - provide reports on progress.
- Government and HEIs need to work together to provide a sustainable and consistent pathway for language learners and highlight the value of language learning.
- Language skills should be seen as a highly desirable asset for all government staff and not simply as the preserve of a cadre of language specialists.
- Support for vulnerable languages needs to be strengthened, both within HEIs and also through increasing direct strategic connections and partnerships with government.
- The diverse linguistic resources of the UK's ethnic communities need to be mobilised, supported, and given public recognition through a certification of competence.

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In 2011 the British Academy launched a four year programme to support Languages and Quantitative Skills (L&QS) in the humanities and the social sciences. Through the L&QS programme, the Academy demonstrates the value and importance of languages for the health and wellbeing of education, research, individuals and society at large.

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