

Dialogues

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Whither UK Language Policy?

by [Jean Coussins](#)

In this article, Baroness Coussins, co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, outlines the current priorities for language policy in the UK, highlighting inconsistencies and fragmentation in approach, and making the case for coordination across government.

Modern Foreign Languages: the current position

Over fifty universities have scrapped some or all of their Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) degrees since the year 2000. Applications to study languages at university have dropped more than the overall rate. At school, GCSE take-up is better since the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), but A-level is in freefall. The supply chain for future language teachers, interpreters and translators is at serious risk of drying up.

It must be a priority for government to rectify this if the UK is to stand any chance of holding our own, never mind providing leadership, in a globalized economy and a world with increasingly challenging social and political upheavals, ranging from climate change to mass migration, from digital innovation to terrorism.

Speaking only English is as much of a disadvantage as speaking no English. It is a myth that English is enough, or that everyone speaks it. In fact, only 6% of the world's population are native English speakers, and 75% speak no English at all.

There are more blogs in Japanese than English. The proportion of web content in English is diminishing, while the share of Mandarin content is rapidly expanding. The fastest growing language across all social media platforms is Arabic. French and German still regularly come top of UK employers' skill-set wish list.

Over 70% of UK employers say they are not happy with the foreign language skills of school leavers or graduates and are forced increasingly to recruit from overseas to meet their needs. So unless the UK addresses its languages deficit, it will do serious damage to the competitiveness of British business and also to the employability of young people in a global labour market. [Research at Cardiff University](#) suggests that the economy is losing out on £48 billion every year – or 3.5% of GDP – through lost or missed business as a result of a lack of language skills in the workforce. If you can't read the initial tender documents, you can't bid for the contract, and they are by no means always in English.

An inconsistent approach

I would characterize government policy on languages as ‘two steps forward, three steps back’. For example, languages are now compulsory at Key Stage 2 (i.e. from age 7) – an excellent two steps forward. But the drawback is that in practice, what actually happens in schools is hugely varied, with some pupils making great progress and others doing just a tokenistic few minutes every week. This is largely because of a lack of qualified teachers in the primary sector. A recent report from the National Audit Office suggested that the dropout rate for MFL teachers was one of the highest. And with more than a third of MFL teachers and 85% of foreign language classroom assistants currently being non-UK EU citizens, the potential for MFL teaching in our schools to collapse unless they are guaranteed residency status as part of the Brexit deal is serious indeed.

Teaching provision aside, an inconsistent approach to language policy in education can also be seen in curriculum design. A positive move is the welcome inclusion of a language as one of the compulsory elements in the English Baccalaureate. Since this was introduced, take-up of language GCSEs has risen significantly. Take-up had halved following the government’s decision in 2004 to make languages optional after age 14. It had been 80-90% and it is now back up to around 50%. Less welcome, though, is a new system of measuring secondary schools’ achievement at GCSE, known as Progress 8, allows schools to tick all their boxes without a single pupil doing a single language. So we have two systems in conflict with each other.

Similar inconsistency exists in policy with regard to the world of work and the economy, in that the government says it recognizes the importance of language skills to export success, which is positive, but the former UK Trade & Investment department (UKTI) used to have language and culture specialists to advise and help businesses, and UKTI has now been replaced with regional contracts with the new Department for International Trade, who have done away with one-to-one advice on languages altogether.

Missed opportunities

The civil service is an important element in any holistic plan. Who knows what linguistic resources we may already have at our disposal, if only we thought it important enough to find out? Oddly, the government remains persistently averse to conducting any sort of languages audit across the civil service.

And if that would be useful, then how much more helpful for the future would it be also to take advantage of the fact that over one million school pupils in the UK are bilingual? Too often, these children are seen as an educational problem rather than an educational asset. Children who speak languages like Arabic, Korean, Turkish, Farsi and others at home should have their linguistic skills recognized, nurtured and accredited and shown how much more employable they will be as a result, whether in business, diplomacy or education.

It would be unfair not to mention some of the positive developments across government. For example, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s annual budget for essential language training has been increased by nearly 12% in the last two years and the department’s Language Centre provides training in 86 languages. The Ministry of Defence ensures its language training conforms to NATO standards for language proficiency and the armed forces now require language skills for promotion.

How do we address this lack of coordination?

I think the interconnectedness of language issues needs to be reflected in the machinery of government. One way of doing this might be to have a designated Minister with responsibility for cross-government languages strategy, with the authority, research back-up and vision to connect the dots between the various Departments and between Departments and external bodies and agencies. The Treasury should realize that it is as much in its interests to see increased take-up of MFL at GCSE and A-level as it is for the Department for Education. Or perhaps there should be a Chief Government Linguist, just as there is a Chief Government Scientist and a Chief Medical Officer?

The case for languages should not be made only on utilitarian grounds. We know they are good for business, necessary for modern social and political life, and for defence and security. We even know they are good for your health. But languages are about much more than all that. We too often neglect the fun of participation and the pleasure of cultural horizons being opened up, that languages provide. Not everyone needs to be a specialist professional linguist. But the soft power advantage in the 21st century belongs to the multilingual citizen and nation, not the blinkered Brit of the past. The bottom line is that languages are the gateway to a more civilized coexistence with other people.

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