

Vocationally related language learning in further education

CILT, the National Centre for Languages works with the Skills for Business Network to bring employer demand for language skills to the fore, and to help providers develop language courses matched to the needs of employers. As part of our Language Skills Alliance work, we carried out a survey of FE colleges throughout the UK in June 2006. The aim of the survey was to inform planning for languages in FE in relation to the specialist Diplomas in England and related developments in other parts of the UK. We also wanted to assess the national picture in the context of changes in Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funding in England, and verify the basis for anecdotal evidence of cuts to provision and staffing.

The findings are based on responses received from 139 out of 296 FE Colleges in the UK, a response rate of 46%. The survey complements and updates research carried out in 2005 by the then Learning and Skills Development Agency².

Key findings

- Fewer than half of the FE colleges surveyed across the UK offer opportunities to learn languages in or alongside vocational courses.
- This proportion is declining: 36% of the colleges surveyed had previously offered languages with vocational courses but now do not do so.
- One in four of those colleges that do offer languages has reduced its provision, and nearly half expect further decreases in learner numbers.
- The survey identified fewer than 2,000 language learners on vocational study courses in the colleges surveyed. We estimate that the total number of students studying languages represents less than 1% of all students on vocational courses³. The average number of students per college was 23.
- Spanish is overwhelmingly the most popular language offered, followed by French, Italian and German. There is very little provision at all for any other languages.
- Travel and Tourism is the main vocational area to which language courses are linked, followed by Business. Very few colleges offer languages linked to other vocational areas.
- Although the findings confirm anecdotal evidence for a continuing decline in language provision in FE⁴, there is some evidence of innovative provision and some optimism about future prospects for languages in FE.

Issues and implications

Declining opportunities to combine languages with vocational courses

The reduced language provision in FE suggested by the findings contrasts with the growing evidence of the need for languages at all levels and in a wide range of sectors in the workplace⁵. Language learning opportunities are important in vocational learning, which is being more closely focused to supply the skills needed by employers. Languages are also important to students' general learning and development, helping them to broaden their horizons and their understanding of the wider world. UK nationals without language skills are restricted in their ability to access international opportunities and have reduced employability in comparison with their counterparts in other European countries: employers can and do employ foreign nationals when the UK workforce does not offer the language skills they seek⁶.

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Reasons for the decline

Colleges across the UK gave funding as the most immediate reason for the expected decrease in numbers of students learning a language related to a vocational course. To date, it has been possible for many colleges in England to offer language provision, leading to stand-alone qualifications, supported by 'additionality' funding. That funding source is no longer available. Local LSC funding is prioritised towards whole qualifications and it is only when a language programme is embedded in the core vocational course that it may attract LSC funding support. The language component offered in relation to a vocational course has traditionally been an optional, additional element and is therefore vulnerable. As local LSC budgets come under pressure Local Learning Partnerships, individual college senior managers and vocational curriculum managers, set priorities accordingly. This trend for languages to be eclipsed by other priorities for vocational students is reflected across the UK.

The issue of funding for languages in England was also highlighted in recent LSDA research, commissioned by the LSC, published in 2006, which looked at the impact of new fee policies in FE. They found that, while overall colleges reported fee effects had not reduced their FE enrolments this year, there are some sectoral effects in fee policy. Colleges identified a number of areas where provision might be at risk because of fee changes, and concerns were expressed about programmes for foreign languages⁷.

Funding issues apart, there is also evidence of a longer-term decline in vocational language learning over the past decade in which other factors have played a part. Colleges which have made cuts in their vocational language provision or discontinued it altogether frequently cite poor student motivation, and lack of support for languages from senior management and from other subject departments as key reasons. These findings were also highlighted by LSDA (2005) and separately by a doctoral research investigation into FE language provision in Scotland⁸.

The issue of student motivation is a complex one and requires further investigation. In addition to the reasons provided by the respondents there may be additional factors for the apparent decline: for example, the persistent view among some sections of the general public that 'English is enough' is likely to play a part, as will the perceived relevance of the course content and the form of assessment. The quality of the learning experience which, in turn, links to the scarcity of specialist professional development opportunities for language tutors in FE may also be a factor in some circumstances. The Subject Learning Coaching network in England, now supporting the dissemination of Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) resources designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning of languages in the post-16 phase, will come too late for tutors at many of the FE colleges responding to this survey.

Languages offered

The predominance of Spanish may be linked to the fact that language units on vocational courses are most frequently linked to Travel and Tourism courses. (There were 34.5 million air journeys between Spain and the UK in 2005, far more than with any other country⁹.) It may also be linked to the fact that most students seem to be starting a new language with their vocational course, and may already have learned French at school. The availability of tutors is almost certainly a factor favouring the four European languages over others such as Chinese, Russian and Arabic, which are increasingly needed in the workplace. The Sector Skills Council for Hospitality, Leisure, Travel and Tourism, People 1st, has identified a need for Chinese and Russian in its sector, with a risk of international business being lost if this requirement is not met¹⁰.

Vocational areas covered

The inclusion of a language unit on a travel and tourism course should be self-evident, but even in this sector opportunities for language study are rare. In other vocational areas the value of language study achieves even less recognition. This means that students currently training to be hotel managers, transport workers, beauty therapists or mechanics are unlikely to have the opportunity to develop the kinds of language skills that would be useful to them in these professions. There is a need to raise awareness of the value of languages in all vocational areas and correct the misconception that languages are only useful for jobs and career progression if you are going to work abroad. Giving a higher profile to the international context of the student's chosen career pathway would help to raise aspirations of learners, as well as linking more closely to skills they are likely to find useful in the future. For example, language skills may mean that a hairdressing student can gain useful early career experience in the international cruise service industry and aspire to work in a top international salon.

Skills levels and progression

Colleges most commonly offer Level 1 qualifications (equivalent to Foundation level GCSE in England). This may indicate that students are starting a new language from scratch, and it may also be a reflection of the shortage of curriculum time available to study a language within a vocational programme. Only just over one-third of colleges (38%) which offer languages do so at Level 2 (= Higher level GCSE) and fewer than one in ten offers progression to Level 3 (= A level). This is of concern on two accounts: firstly, while even a small amount of language is useful, employer expectations and occupational roles in a range of sectors demand a higher level of language competence. Secondly, while horizontal progression – adding a new language – brings its own benefits and can be particularly relevant for some sectors and occupational roles, the scarcity of opportunities in FE to progress in a language studied at school is limiting for the individual and the UK skills pool. The lack of opportunity for progression may have a negative effect on student motivation and the phenomenon needs further investigation.

Implications for future development

The changing face of education post 14 offers many positive opportunities to develop languages in line with the needs of employers and in combination with sector-specific skills. However, the picture painted by this survey shows a serious erosion of the languages infrastructure in the FE sector which may make it hard to reinstate provision in line with these new developments. Colleges report staff reductions and in particular a loss of full-time permanent staff, including specialist language managers who are so important in championing the cause of languages. The reduction in language staff results in the loss of the skills and expertise needed to teach languages linked to vocational courses. There will need to be a major programme of retraining and professional development for languages to flourish within the FE sector.

There is clearly a need to raise awareness at all levels of the value of language study and to emphasise the relevance of language skills to students' ambitions and aspirations for the future.

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Positive indicators

On a positive note, nineteen colleges said they expected numbers to increase as a result of new programmes or initiatives. Some of the reasons given for the expected upturn were students' increased motivation to take a language within travel and tourism courses; preparation for language learning within the new specialised Diplomas in England (which will be taught for the first time in 2008); and, in Wales, the inclusion of compulsory language studies in the Welsh Baccalaureate. There are some good examples of colleges using the motivation of overseas trips for introducing language preparation, and there is some good practice in developing relevant language-teaching materials for use in the classroom. Some colleges have maintained some of their vocationally related language offer by using enrichment funding instead of core funding; linked to this there are some good examples of colleges introducing cross-college timetabling or a common slot once a week which draws together students from a number of disciplines to learn a language. In some cases vocational departments have taken the lead and made time within their core hours for a language element. Other innovations include offering languages with less conventional subjects such as sport and fashion. Despite the motivational challenges of teaching some students on vocationally related language courses, some colleges do report successful results once students are won over by good teaching and the arguments as to how learning a language will benefit them.

Conclusion

Languages will not flourish in FE as an optional extra. In order to reverse the current decline, language learning needs to be strongly promoted, properly funded and given a high priority for development within the 14–19 specialist Diplomas. Alongside this, there needs to be a thorough, ongoing programme of staff development, linked to further investigation of ways of addressing poor student motivation.

Data reports and survey background

A full data report from the survey and further details of the sample and methodology can be downloaded from www.cilt.org.uk/key/language/trends/2006/fesurvey.htm

References

1. Four responses were received from different sites of the same college and this has been taken into account in the calculation of the response rate. The full data report, published on the CILT website, contains full details on the sample and research methodology.
2. LSDA (2005). *Modern Foreign Languages in a vocational context: An effective way to deliver the National Languages Strategy?*
3. The total number of students taking vocational courses in FE in 2004/5 was 1,680,700 (DfES Statistical First Release, Vocational Qualifications in the UK: 2004/05, published February 2006). If the proportion of students studying languages identified in our survey were similar in the non-responding colleges, we would estimate the national figure around 4,000. However, if we assume that colleges would be more likely to respond to our survey if they offered languages, it is likely that the actual total would be lower than this.
4. For reasons of past practice in data coding, it is extremely difficult to identify language learner numbers from routine aggregate LSC data returns. It is through exploring at the level of the individual college, as pinpointed by this survey, that the decline in numbers of this particular category of language learners becomes evident.
5. See, for example *Talking world class: The impact of language skills on the UK economy*, CILT, 2005 and *Talking sense*, a research study of language skills management in major companies, CILT 2005.
6. eg. *Graduate Skills and Recruitment in the City*, Financial Skills Council, 2006.
7. *The impact of new fee policies in FE*, LSDA Research Project SR 738, May 2006.
8. *Critical perspectives on Modern Languages in Scottish further education 2000–2002*, Doughty (2005), University of Stirling Doctoral Thesis.
9. Figures from Civil Aviation Authority.
10. People1st (2006), *Skill needs assessment for the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism sector: United Kingdom report*.

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vocational languages resource bank



If you need help in developing relevant resources for vocationally related language courses, you could start by visiting CILT's new Vocational Languages Resource Bank at www.vocational-languages.org.uk.

The VLRB offers free resources and ideas for teachers to use in their classrooms when delivering courses with a vocational slant. Some examples of these are the Certificate in Business Language Competence (CBLC), National Vocational Qualification language units (NVQ), ABC Certificate in Practical Languages, National Open College Network (NOCN), NCFE Certificate in Foreign Language and Applied GCSE in French.

The resources for the Vocational Languages Resource Bank have been designed by teachers working in schools as well as colleges of further and adult education, all of whom have current experience of teaching vocational languages. Here are some more details of the resources:



- Resources have been developed at entry level up to Level 3, although the majority of the resources will be at Entry level to Level 2.
- It is not intended that the website will be able to provide a full set of resources for a particular course, but it will certainly offer a good starting point and will present a wealth of ideas for teachers to develop their own materials.
- Languages currently featured on the site are French, German, Spanish, Italian, Urdu, Japanese and Arabic. This range of languages will grow with time.
- The resources are both text-based, visual and with sound, with examples to cover the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, (although not in every language at every level).
- There are tips for making your own resources, examples of schemes of work and links to other web-based resources.
- It is possible to copy and adapt resources developed for one vocational area to use in others.

It is anticipated that the Resource Bank will grow as more and more teachers add their own resources. The VLRB will be a useful central point to gather resources that teachers everywhere can share, rather than everyone having to beaver away in their own institutions reinventing the wheel!



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CILT, the National Centre for Languages
20 Bedfordbury
London WC2N 4LB
Tel: 020 7379 5101
Fax: 020 7379 5082
www.cilt.org.uk