

The changing profile of languages provision in England: implications for HE

Languages have enjoyed unprecedented attention in the media recently, from the publication of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000), to the European year of languages (2001), the Green Paper consultation document on Language Learning (2002), the publication of the National Languages Strategy (2002), and the appointment of the National Director for Languages (Sept 2003). All these received welcome – if not always positive – coverage in the media, and have shown languages to be firmly on the political agenda.

The final report and recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry was published in 2000 (*Languages: the next generation. The final report and recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry*; www.nuffieldfoundation.org/languages/home), and gave the profession some hope that the problems encountered by Modern Languages in the UK would be addressed. It contained 15 recommendations, all designed to redress the falling capability in languages. The Government's Green paper on 14-19 education (www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19greenpaper) was then published in 2002, including a separate consultation document on Language Learning, and it is now 18 months since the AFLS debated its response to this document (www.unl.ac.uk/sals/afls/consultation.html). The present article will briefly review developments since then. It will report on the DfES Languages Strategy for England (*Languages for all: Languages for life*, 2002), and on the possible implications for HE Modern Languages (Kelly & Jones, 2003; Marshall, 2003).

The Green Paper's Language Learning consultation document understandably caused much concern in Modern Languages circles when it was published in early 2002. One of its central proposal, making the study of a foreign language optional throughout the curriculum except for Key stage 3 (11-14 years old), seemed to contradict its stated core objective of substantially increasing the national capability in languages. Indeed, the many Associations which responded to the consultation document all made this point: making languages optional is unlikely to convince children that languages are a vital key skill in the 21st century, which should be an integral part of any well-rounded education.

The National Languages Strategy (*Languages for all: Languages for life: a strategy for England*, DfES, 2002) was published later that year, with very few amendments as a result of the consultation process. Languages are now only compulsory for 11-14 year-olds, and the implications are likely to be massive for the whole sector. I will first briefly summarise the main points of this document, before addressing some of its implications for the post-16 sector.

As in the case of the Green Paper, the National Languages Strategy stresses the importance of foreign languages in today's multilingual and multicultural society. The foreword by Baroness C. Ashton, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Early Years and School Standards, states:

The ability to understand and communicate in other languages is increasingly important in our society and in the global economy. Languages contribute to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society, to personal fulfilment, mutual understanding, commercial success and international trade and global citizenship.

(DfES, 2002, p.4)

The necessity to 'transform our country's capability in languages' is stressed, which no doubt will be wholeheartedly endorsed by language educators throughout the sector. The overarching objectives of the Languages Strategy are also laudable:

- To improve teaching and learning of languages;
- To introduce a ladder recognition system (a system of credits recognising language skills);
- To increase the number of people studying languages in further and higher education and in work-based training;
- To address the shortage of Modern Languages teachers;
- To increase the number of language colleges to 200 by 2005.

(DfES 2002, pp. 5-7)

But as with the Green Paper, further reading of this document, which then outlines how the government intends to fulfil these worthwhile objectives, makes somewhat puzzling reading. The first major change in policy is to make the study of a language optional post 14, effectively reducing the compulsory teaching of languages to just 3 years of children's school experience. This measure was

introduced in English schools in September 2003, and, given the shortage of ML teachers, implemented straight away by many head teachers. How this is supposed to narrow the gap between English children and their European counterparts, who typically study 2 or 3 foreign languages from the age of 8 or earlier, and carry on throughout their secondary education, remains unclear: '[...] schools will no longer be required to teach Modern Foreign Languages to all pupils. All schools *will* be required to ensure as a minimum that they are available to any pupil wishing to study them.' (DfES 2002, p. 26).

The second major change is the introduction of foreign languages in primary schools by 2012, which is to be welcome of course. However, foreign languages are to be an 'entitlement' in the primary sector, meaning that provision for foreign language learning will have to be made within schools, but their take-up will remain optional. More detail is given about ways in which languages might be integrated into the primary curriculum than was the case in the Green Paper, but many questions remain unanswered, not least where all the language teachers required for delivering primary languages are going to come from, given the shrinking number of ML undergraduates. It is also unclear how this entitlement is going to redress the elitist image of foreign language learning. Foreign languages are likely to remain compulsory in the private sector, and taken up by middle class children in state schools, as is currently the case.

Very little is said in the Strategy document about the role of further and higher education in helping deliver the strategy, except in their supporting role towards language provision in schools, e.g. by sharing facilities, resources and expertise. The essential role of the HE sector as a provider of the next generation of ML teachers, and therefore the urgent necessity of addressing the university recruitment crisis, is not addressed.

At a more micro-level, some good initiatives are outlined in the document, such as the envisaged ladder of recognition, from beginners to advanced, which 'complements and sits alongside existing qualifications frameworks, including the Common European Framework, so equivalent attainment can easily be identified' (DfES 2002, p. 38). This is indeed a crucial point, if the transition from primary to secondary is to be managed smoothly, given the optional nature of entitlement at primary level. It is vitally important for ensuring efficient delivery of languages

that there is clear progression in the curriculum, as we argued in our 2002 response. How this transition will be resourced and managed in practice by secondary schools, who will have to cater for children arriving with varying degrees of expertise in a range of different languages, remains to be seen, however, and remains an important concern.

Before looking at the implications of these major changes for the post 16 sector, including HE, let us briefly return to the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, in order to see how far the National Languages Strategy followed its recommendations. Out of the 15 recommendations offered, a few are clearly evident in the Government's Languages Strategy document, others not at all.

(1) Recommendations which are apparent in the document:

- The introduction of a language supremo (called National Director for Languages), who was appointed in September 2003 (recommendation no. 2);
- The introduction of a national framework to define levels of language competence (no. 15);
- The need to intensify the drive to recruit more language teachers (no. 12). There are initiatives in the document meant to recruit language teachers, and train more primary school teachers in languages (little is said, however, about how to reconcile this objective with the falling numbers of ML graduates);
- The need to exploit ICT (no. 13). Although resourcing remains unclear, this is a recurrent theme throughout the document.

(2) Other recommendations figure, but their delivery remains far from clear, e.g.:

- The need to raise the profile of languages in the UK (no. 3) is also stressed in the Languages Strategy document, but it is not clear how this is going to be achieved (and making languages optional for all but 3 years cannot be reconciled with this objective);

- The need to establish business-education partnerships (no. 4). This seems to be a key theme throughout the document, but again it is not clear how it will be implemented;
- The need to invest in an early start (no. 6). Although the government is introducing languages in primary schools, the fact that they remain optional will mean that some children will miss out;
- Making languages a key skill (no. 1 and no. 3): although the importance of languages is stressed in the strategy document, the move towards optionality makes it difficult to see this become reality;
- Ensuring wider participation beyond school (no. 8). The use of ICT and the framework of qualifications should go some way to making this easier, but again here, delivery and resourcing remain unclear;
- Developing a strategic approach to languages in Higher Education (no. 10): as we mentioned above, very little is said about HE in the document. However, the plea that fees should be waived for students spending their year abroad as language assistants and on work placements seems to have been heard.

(3) The following recommendations do not figure at all:

- The need to provide a coherent and consistent path of language learning from early childhood throughout life: ‘learning for all children should start in primary school and become a sustained dimension of their entire school education’ (no. 5). Even if the Languages Ladder should ensure some continuity of provision, making languages optional will prevent clear expectations about levels of proficiency at given points in the education system;
- The need to raise the provision for languages in secondary schools: ‘all pupils should leave secondary education equipped with foundation language skills’ (no. 7). Many pupils will clearly not achieve this if they only study languages between ages 11-14.
- The recommendation that languages should be a specified component of the 16-19 curriculum, and a requirement for entry to higher education (no.

9). Again, this will clearly not be feasible with so little compulsory provision.

- The need to establish a prioritised research and development agenda for languages (no. 14). Nowhere in the document is the necessity for important policy decisions to be properly informed by research made clear.

The National Languages Strategy has only minimally addressed the core issues presented in the Nuffield Languages Inquiry. Today's generation of children will only study one language (or possibly 2?) for 3 years of their life, unless they choose to continue studying them. It will be some years before languages are introduced in the primary sector, and only time will tell what their take-up will be. In the meantime, a whole generation of children will miss out.

In the next section, I will explore briefly the implications of some of these issues for the sector which concern us most directly, HE. This section will be based for a large part on an analysis of the university language recruitment crisis by Keith Marshall (2003), and on a report commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation in order to explore changes in Higher Education (Kelly & Jones, 2003).

The likely impact of the new measures introduced in the National Languages Strategy, and more specifically the abolishment of compulsory languages post-14 and the introduction of languages in the Primary sector, is explored in Marshall (2003). He draws tentative lessons from (a) the Scottish experience, where languages were introduced in the primary in the early nineties, and (b) Wales, where a foreign language has never been a compulsory subject for GCSE.

Scottish ML entries for Highers (end of Secondary exam) over the last 25 years had declined even more rapidly than in England. Scotland introduced primary foreign languages in 1989 in order to try to reverse this decline, and by 1999, 90% of Scottish primary schools were offering a foreign language (Marshall 2003, p. 132). Although numbers for Highers kept declining until 1999/2000, Scotland is now seeing an increase in numbers for Highers in French, German and Spanish. This increase was fairly substantial in 2002 (+11% in French; +8.3% in German; +9.7% in Spanish). It is too early to say if this reversal of trends is due to the Primary initiative, as no study has yet been carried out to fully assess its impact. One important difference between the English and Scottish situation is of course the removal of a compulsory language post-14 in England, which is not the case

in Scotland, where the primary initiative was an addition to the rest of the curriculum. It remains to be seen how the Primary initiative in England will affect take-up of languages later on in the education ladder.

In Wales, a foreign language GCSE has never been compulsory. In 2002, 37% of Welsh pupils opted for a ML at GCSE, compared to 82% in England (in 1995, the number was 49%, so the trend is clearly downwards in Wales too). However, not surprisingly, the proportion of GCSE students who carry on to A level is higher in Wales than it is in England. Marshall claims (2003, p. 137) that this higher progression rate does not quite compensate for the smaller entry rate at GCSE (it nearly does in French, but not in German and Spanish). It is difficult to compare the Welsh and English situations, however. Welsh children have to study both English and Welsh as part of the core curriculum from ages 4 to 16. Consequently, not only is there less space in the curriculum for other subjects, but children are also exposed to two languages throughout their schooling, which might depress the felt need for the study of another language. Marshall concludes: *'the consequence of making MFL optional at GCSE is not whether it will lead to a further decline in A level numbers, but how much. And that will feed straight through into first year-language classes in universities.'* (2003, p. 140).

The Nuffield-commissioned report, *A new landscape for languages*, also concludes that we can be almost certain that numbers are going to continue declining. What we do not know is how much, and the report presents both a 'worst case' scenario, and the 'status quo' scenario, in which the decline is not so severely affected by the fall in GCSE numbers.

The report documents changes in the take-up of languages across the different sectors (GCSE, AS/A levels, university provision – both specialist degrees, and courses for non-specialists), across a range of countries. The picture which emerges is of a steady decline globally (except in the case of courses for non-specialists), which we are all too familiar with, and which is not confined to the UK. Many European countries, given the dominance of English as the first foreign language studied, have responded by making the study of at least 2 foreign languages compulsory. Apart from Ireland and the UK, foreign languages are optional only in Italy. Even if other countries, however, are also suffering from a decline in the take up of foreign languages in the post-compulsory sector, a

direct comparison is misleading: France had 130,000 students in language degrees in 2001, compared to 8,000 in the UK!

The report puts forward a number of recommendations for addressing the current recruitment crisis in HE, which I summarise below (Kelly and Jones 2003, pp. 34-9):

(1) The profession has an important role to play in articulating clearly the rationale for studying languages, so that young people are aware of their importance and value, not only intrinsically, but on the employment market too. Our sector also needs to liaise more effectively with the secondary sector in order to deliver this message. We must capitalise on and reinforce the work started by high profile recent initiatives such as the Nuffield Languages Inquiry or the European Year of Languages, in order to inform public opinion.

(2) The second recommendation is that both A level and HE curricula should be reviewed, so that they better respond to the needs and changing aspirations of today's students.

(3) Although languages degrees are in decline, language options within other degrees are on the increase, and we must respond to this demand by differentiating the provision of language courses for a range of different publics.

(4) The various sectors delivering language provision, from the primary to HE, must cooperate and coordinate their responses to the challenges currently facing the profession. For example, the languages ladder must encompass progression from primary to final year undergraduate, in order to ensure continuity between sectors. Closer collaboration between the 16-19 sector and higher education is particularly urgent.

(5) HE institutions must also collaborate among themselves in order to maintain diversity of provision, especially in lesser-taught languages and subjects.

(6) Universities must play a part in addressing the current shortage of ML teachers, due to a large part to the sharp drop in the number of ML graduates. For example, the introduction of language degrees with a curriculum oriented towards ML teaching and learning should be explored.

(7) Resource allocation models within universities should be studied in order to identify key factors which affect the success of language programmes.

(8) As provision outside the mainstream education system is on the increase (e.g. optional, non-credit bearing courses, after-school clubs etc.), it should be studied in order to assess fully the role it can play.

(9) As difficulties with language strategy are a global problem, an international Languages Observatory should be established, which would collect and disseminate information about international developments in language learning, in higher education.

These are all useful suggestions meant to help us make the best of falling numbers and a changing student population. It is indeed important that we do not become despondent and that we keep thinking creatively about what we can do to level out if not reverse the situation.

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