

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Why the British do not learn languages: myths and motivations in the United Kingdom

Journal Item

How to cite:

Coleman, James A. (2009). Why the British do not learn languages: myths and motivations in the United Kingdom. *Language Learning Journal*, 37(1) pp. 111–127.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 Association for Language Learning

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/09571730902749003>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Why the British do not learn languages: myths and motivation in the United Kingdom.

James A. Coleman, The Open University

Abstract

In the light of recent debates on the declining take-up of languages in English schools, and on pupils' motivation towards language learning, this article furthers discussion and asks broader questions. Is there a coincidence between trends in British attitudes to Europe and the growing or waning enthusiasm for language learning across all sectors? What role is played – and what attitudes revealed – by the pronouncements and actions of British politicians when they are not specifically addressing language issues? Is public xenophobia echoed or shaped by the printed and broadcast media? And when so many initiatives are seeking to address British insularity and monolingualism, is there more that can be done?

Introduction

Coleman *et al.* (2007) reported on a large-scale survey of the motivation towards language learning of more than 10,000 students in English secondary education, showing, as had earlier studies, that initial enthusiasm at age 11 declines quickly and consistently over the next two years, especially for boys. A supportive institutional environment, as evidenced by Specialist Language College status or by early adoption at pilot stage of the new measures of achievement known as the Languages Ladder or ASSET Languages, does, however, mitigate the fall in motivation. The article linked language learning motivation and the take-up of language examinations, and suggested that the removal of languages from the core curriculum at Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) had damaged the perceived status of languages and 'led to a dramatic fall' (2007: 245, 249). The article further suggested that, despite official Government support for language learning, wider public opinion, which is hostile to multilingualism, might also partially account for students' disaffection (2007: 250-251).

Macaro (2008) responded to the article by questioning some factual statements and challenging the link between, on the one hand, the move from compulsion to optionality, and, on the other, the decline in language examination entries. The present article, while answering these points, seeks above all to extend the discussion of why the British are unwilling to learn languages, building on trends at all levels from primary to adult. The author suggests that the negativity of public opinion, itself echoed and shaped by the media and by Government, is stronger than the positivity of those within Government and education who seek to promote international openness and the practical and personal benefits of competence in languages other than English. The reasons for declining take-up of language education are undoubtedly linked to policy and pedagogy, but cannot be fully understood without looking beyond the school gates.

A response to Ernesto Macaro

In the *Language Learning Journal* (36, 1), Ron Dearing (2008) provides a largely positive report on action following the *Languages Review* (Dearing and King 2007), while Ernesto Macaro (2008) offers an interpretation of the decline in language study at secondary level which differs from that in Coleman *et al.* (2007): this issue is the primary focus of the present article.

However, in seeking reasons for changes in the take-up of languages at GCSE and A level, and suggesting actions to address the decline, Macaro also makes several related points:

- (1) that the increase in GCSE entries in languages from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s is unrelated to the incorporation of MFL in the core curriculum which came in only at the end of this period (2008: 102-3)
- (2) that the implementation of compulsory language study for all in the 1990s, and adoption of inappropriate teaching methods, especially near-exclusive use of the target language, may actually have triggered the decline in interest
- (3) that ‘an hour a week in primary school’ (2008: 106) will not make much of an impact on England’s language skills
- (4) that there should be more intensive teaching in Year 7
- (5) that all UK universities and colleges should require a second language to intermediate level as a condition of entry.

He further asserts that the statement ‘in 1988, the Government introduced both a National Curriculum and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)’ (Coleman *et al.* 2007, 249) is ‘not correct’ (2008, 101-2). Certainly, the condensed historical note provided for international readers unfamiliar with the British education system may perhaps be unintentionally misleading, but GCSE, as Macaro notes, **was** first examined in 1988, while it was the Education Reform Act of 1988 which introduced the National Curriculum. And to be fair, the authors did make clear in the same paragraph that it was only ‘from the early 1990s’ that a modern foreign language (MFL) was to be studied by all, and that the legal compulsion came in later still.

To address the substantive issues:

(1) Macaro is clearly correct that numbers taking GCSE French or German were increasing even before a language became a core element of the National Curriculum, i.e. before the cohort which sat the exam in 1996. Nonetheless, the long lead time which often characterises changes in education policy is designed to allow schools to plan ahead, and it is not uncommon for them to jump the gun by introducing new measures before they are legally obliged to do so – two prominent examples from the present decade are the premature removal of compulsory language study at KS4, and the introduction of primary languages.

(2) There is wide agreement that the approaches adopted in the 1990s were not suitable for all pupils. Many teachers did argue in favour of languages in the core curriculum, and were delighted when languages, which are hard but vital just like maths or science, were awarded similar compulsory (i.e. important) status. But the over-emphasis on target language teaching, and the imposition of Languages for All indeed meant a sense of relief in many quarters once it was clear that languages could be dropped. Coleman (2002) suggested that a GCSE suitable for all posed too few

challenges to the gifted, meant too big a leap to A level, and allowed some teachers to drill limited formulae repetitively, whilst also arguing that the inclusion of one language in a cramped obligatory curriculum made it harder to include a second, still less a third language, so that it became increasingly rare for a youngster to reach 16 thinking 'I am a good linguist and wish to specialise in languages'.

However, students actually 'began voting with their feet' (Macaro 2008: 105) only from 2002, once the intention to remove languages from the core curriculum was explicit. There is very solid evidence in successive *Trends* surveys (CILT 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007) that schools up and down the land anticipated legislation before it was actually brought in. Forward planning, for example in staffing, may require pre-emptive action. Therefore, while there is no doubting the disenchantment of some pupils with KS4 languages over preceding years, it appears to be the promise of optionality which authorised institutional policy change and thus triggered the actual fall in GCSE entries. There is substantial anecdotal evidence that the unpopularity of languages with pupils who found them difficult and boring, and with schools who saw them as a threat to their position in rankings, led schools to desist from both teaching all their pupils and entering them for GCSE well in advance of the change in regulation becoming statutory.

The decline became steeper once the policy was implemented: 'Already by Autumn 2002, 30% of schools intended to make languages optional, and a further 25% were considering doing so' (CILT 2003: 1). 'Respondents were concerned about the loss of status for languages across the school, with some reporting a year-on-year increase in the rate of drop out: *'In the first year when a language became optional we had about 50% of the cohort opt out. In the two years since then the situation has become worse.'* *'Disapplication has already given languages less status.'* *'Pupils are already saying in Year 8 that they do not see the point of working hard at languages because they do not intend to opt for them anyway.'* Clearly, damage is being done to languages departments in this situation (CILT 2003: 2). Ofsted (2008, 4) concurs: 'the number of students studying languages [at Key Stage 4] is much reduced, largely because the subject is no longer statutory'. The statement that 'making the subject optional damaged the perceived status of languages, and the introduction of choice has led to a dramatic decline in the take-up of languages post-14' (Coleman *et al.* 2007, 349), which Macaro (2008, 101) queries, thus seems entirely justified.

(3) It is indisputable that one hour a week is inadequate to develop substantial language proficiency, which is why it is worrying that most primary language provision appears not even to be attaining this minimum. Macaro's argument (2008: 106) that the case for primary languages remains unmade is very persuasive. However, an intensification of early language learning would depend on the Government's real commitment to systematic and strategic development of primary languages, and it is argued below that the position of the Government as a whole is in fact less enlightened than the existence of a National Languages Strategy might imply.

(4) More intensive teaching in Year 7 would undoubtedly be desirable, and Macaro's own research (e.g. Macaro & Erler 2008) is pointing to ways in which it might become more effective.

With regard to (5), although Macaro's title includes the phrase 'getting real', it is, sadly, unrealistic to expect autonomous tertiary institutions to impose a new admission criterion which a high percentage of their entrants could not meet and which would threaten their market share and income. While University College London expressed in December 2006 the intention to make a GCSE in a modern foreign language compulsory for admission to all of its courses from 2012 (an initiative supported by its innovative ATLAS website <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/atlas/languages.html>), Cambridge University announced in March 2008 that it would drop its equivalent requirement from 2009, in order to avoid discrimination against state schools.

Motivation for languages

We therefore return to the main issue - 'what accounted for this substantial decline in motivation to study an MFL in Key Stage 4?' (Macaro 2008, 103). Coleman *et al.* (2007, 245-255) summarised research into language learner motivations in educational contexts, but did not chart the downward shift in the desire of English learners to acquire foreign language skills. For that, we need to look at dates, and at attitudes to Europe. Despite laudable and effective small-scale initiatives with community, heritage and world languages such as Arabic and Chinese, language study in England means, above all, European languages. European languages dominate primary initiatives as they continue to do at other levels. They therefore share in the widespread views of Europe which school pupils absorb from the adult world outside the classroom.

It could be argued that the social climate which supported positive attitudes towards otherness – including foreign language study – itself intensified until about the mid-1990s, since when the UK has become more insular in outlook.

1992 was the year in which registrations for specialist language degrees at university peaked (Coleman 2004). British participation in the ERASMUS student exchange scheme peaked in 1994-95, before entering a steady decline which has only recently been halted. 1992 also saw the highest number of entries for French and German at A level. Macaro identifies 1993 as 'the high point of optional GCSE entries pre-Languages for All' (2008, 103), and despite the increase in GCSE entries recorded between 1992 and 2003, 'largely because curriculum reforms introduced in 1992 made studying a language compulsory from 11 to 16 years of age' (Graham 2004, 172), A level entries halved during the same period. In adult education, the fall-off seems to have come rather later, but Dutton & Meyer (2007) note a drop of half a million language learners since a similar survey in 1999. Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level was introduced only in 2000, but after initial enthusiasm for languages as a fourth or fifth post-GCSE subject (Marshall 2000a, 2000b), numbers have fallen consistently, with a 7% year-on-year fall at AS level recorded in 2008.

The trend away from language learning in all sectors from the 1990s into the 2000s suggests that there may be an environmental factor acting on potential language learners at all levels. 1992 was the year of the Maastricht Treaty, and 1993 saw the launch of the United Kingdom Independence Party. Although the word 'Euro sceptic' was apparently coined in 1986 (Daddow 2006, 314), it initially applied only to a fringe of nationalist conservatives, gaining currency through the 1990s and beyond,

especially once the Labour Government elected in 1997 opted not to argue the benefits of European Union membership. The first senior politician since the unelectable Labour Party of the late 1970s and early 1980s to suggest possible withdrawal from the EU was the ex-Chancellor Norman Lamont, in 1994. The Referendum Party, hostile to Britain's continuing membership of the European Union, was founded in 1995. Is there a coincidence of timing here?

Politicians and policy

If there has indeed been a growth in national insularity in parallel with a decline in foreign language learning, coinciding with the end of a long Conservative administration and a decade of Labour Government, what might be the role of policy-makers, public opinion, and the media?

Politicians seem to remain blind to the fallacy of the 'English is enough' mantra. UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in his speech to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) on 23 June 2008, asserted confidently that 'as the global economy expands, Britain can attract companies because of the skills that we have to offer here. If you have skills, educated in Britain, you can work almost anywhere in any part of the world'. Gordon Brown is thus furthering the myth that the world is crying out for monolingual native English speakers – an arrogant assertion with as much validity as his foresight concerning the 'expanding' global economy.

Brown's statement contained no accompanying caveat that international companies need employees with English **and** other languages, whether they are based in the UK or elsewhere. And despite the existence of 352 Specialist Languages Colleges within the SSAT, Brown's speech contained not a single reference to them or to language in education more generally. Language issues appear invisible to policy-makers at the highest level.

The Prime Minister said on the same occasion that he wants 'a world class education, putting our country at the top of the international educational league tables'. Sadly, if one looks at the rankings in which the UK occupies a leading position even within Europe, all are measures of linguistic incompetence (Tables 1, 2, 3).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Across the whole of Europe, 'foreign language teaching in secondary education is increasing. [...] 86% of pupils were learning English in 2006. Although the bases are much lower, the number of pupils learning Spanish has increased by 50%, French by 22% and German by 5%' (European Commission 2008a, 84). But the UK has a lower proportion of its secondary pupils learning a foreign language than any other country in Europe, even English-speaking Ireland (European Commission 2008a, 95). Among British adults, according to a 2007 BBC survey (N=3000), only 2% can ask how to find the toilet in the main language they learnt at school, and only 3% can say sorry. On average, each remembers just seven words.

When the people of a country and their political representatives accept coming last by such a distance, there must be forces in the climate of public opinion, and in the public discourse, which outweigh even the most laudable educational initiatives. Teachers themselves recognise that school is only a minor influence on young people's values and behaviours. The role of politicians is marginal compared to the significance of wider society. Official policy rarely prevails over public sentiment. Contrasting evidence can be found, for instance, in the minimal long-term impact of the campaign to teach Russian across Eastern and Central Europe, compared with the growing demand in Wales for Welsh classes. School experience is one influence on the young, but only one: the time spent in school and the importance of classroom activities are not what is most important to individual pupils. They spend more time with peers, online and watching television. And, beyond the school gates, the public attitude which the media both construct and reflect is hostile to language learning.

The impact on pupils' motivation is predictable: 'A language policy for foreign language teaching will succeed only when learners are convinced that there is a personal need for learning it. A rationale dictated by academics or policymakers is meaningless if it cannot be translated into personal motivation for language learning' (De Bot 2007, 274).

We cannot therefore look only to education, or to the meanderings of educational policy, to explain the falling take-up of languages at all levels. If teaching languages other than English in L1 English-speaking nations is 'a losing battle' (Dörnyei and Csisér 2002: 455) in which the conversations of language professionals 'are often characterised by discouragement and frustration' (Carr and Pauwels 2006: 195), and which contrasts depressingly with multilingualism elsewhere in Europe (Coleman in press), we need to look at the broader social climate.

The prevailing social climate and the media

Casual xenophobia is, regrettably, an accepted and widely unchallenged feature of British society. The number of banks and other service industries advertising **UK-only** call centres (as opposed to those outsourced to India) underlines that jingoism can be perceived as a commercial advantage. 'UK Call Centres Only' is a criterion on price comparison websites like confused.com. A November 2008 flyer for solar heating asks 'Why be held to ransom by **Foreign** owned energy companies?' (capitalisation, bold and underline are original).

The insularity of commerce echoes a series of political decisions which isolate the UK from its neighbours – to stay outside the euro zone, to stay outside Schengen, to retreat on metrication, not to insist on the EU flag on car registration plates.

The deliberate refusal of successive Governments to promote the benefits of EU membership has served only to exacerbate nationalistic sentiment to the point where any referendum on EU-related issues such as the draft EU constitution or subsequent Lisbon agreement cannot be contemplated because it would be unwinnable, not on rational grounds but thanks to popular hostility. We inhabit a climate where xenophobia, and particularly Europhobia, is seen to be officially sanctioned, both by

Government and by big business. It was Gordon Brown who in January 2006 called for a British flag to be flown in every garden.

The press and other media are, however, the worst offenders and most influential in reinforcing prejudice, especially against Europe. Government has not even attempted to counter the insidious jingoism of most of the media, especially the tabloid press – and we recall that social class, as the successive *Trends* surveys show, is a major determiner of language study. The word ‘foreign’ has become a term of abuse across large sections of the UK press and population. In referring to possible adoption of the euro, the BBC’s television, radio and internet news coverage has for a decade consistently used the anti-Europeans’ preferred phrase ‘scrapping the pound’, as in ‘Opinion polls have suggested that any vote on scrapping the pound and adopting the euro would be lost’ (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7766272.stm 5 December 2008), a usage echoed even in its most senior political editor Nick Robinson’s blog (e.g. 4 December 2006).

The ‘European’ label is attached to bad-news stories, however inappropriately. For example, ‘Sisters lose European tax battle’ (BBC News Online 29 April 2008) refers to elderly sisters living together in Marlborough who had been refused by the **British** tax authorities the right to the same inheritance tax exemptions accorded to married and gay couples: the European Court of Human Rights had simply confirmed the UK’s entitlement to tax them as single people.

Small wonder that, according to a *Guardian*/ICM poll published on 26 January 2008 (N = 1009), while 58% think Britain’s EU membership is a good thing, 67% think British identity is being lost, 64% think we have warmer relations with the US, and 52% find the EU undemocratic. Like most of its predecessors, a recent (March 2008) attitude survey of all EU countries with regard to the European Parliament showed, that Britons are both the most hostile to the EU and the most ignorant of it (European Commission 2008b). Of course, British scepticism towards Europe, and the media’s role in promoting it, are not new, and are well established in the academic literature (e.g. Daddow 2006). But what of specifically language issues?

The language teaching community does its best to promote positive attitudes. But good news stories about languages, such as the fact that most of Britain’s wealthiest under-30s in the *Sunday Times Rich List* speak at least two languages, and only 14% are monolinguals, compared to 58% of British 11- to 18-year-olds (*Linguist* 47, 6: 6), find it hard to penetrate the mainstream press.

CiLT, the National Centre for Languages, launched an additional promotional initiative for the European Day of Languages 2008. Activities for teenagers were to draw on the three strands of the Celebrate, Educate, Appreciate campaign:

- Celebrate - a time to celebrate achievement and have fun with languages
- Educate - raise awareness of the benefits of languages in the workplace
- Appreciate - value of all languages at all levels

Googling confirms that there was no echo at all in national media. Indeed, the European Day of Languages has itself received at best sporadic coverage on the well-used BBC news websites. In 2008, the sole incidental mention came in an article on Tesco in Wales: ‘Supermarket tills to speak Welsh’ (26 September 2008). In 2001, the original EU/Council of Europe Year of Languages, the *Telegraph* asserted (20

February 2001) that ‘ENGLISH is fast becoming the lingua franca of the European Union’.

2008 is the UNESCO International Year of Languages – but this passed unnoticed by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror*. It was mentioned only by the *Observer*, in an excellent overview article (Lightfoot 2008) published at the height of the silly season.

The 2008 Maloof Report on multilingualism went unremarked by British news organisations. The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID) has fared no better. EYID is mentioned on a couple of local and national governmental websites, but in England was outsourced – not by either education department, but by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport – to EUCLID UK (<http://www.euclid.info/> and <http://inter.culture.info/>). Tagged on to Liverpool’s cultural festivities and the Edinburgh International Festival, EYID has, as far as I have been able to ascertain, been ignored by the British national and local news media with the sole exception of a report on a Liverpool debate in the *Southport Reporter*.

The warning from EU Multilingualism Commissioner Leonard Orban that Britons are losing out both internationally and at home because of their lack of language skills was picked up only by the same *Observer* reporter (*Observer* 21 September 2008). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an exciting initiative in British schools, do figure twice on the BBC website – on the *Learning English* section and as a news report from Paris on French children doing PE in English (18 January 2009).

Multilingualism itself is typically demonised, as in the *Daily Mail* of 23 April 2008: ‘The scale of the migrant boom was laid bare yesterday with the revelation that Eastern Europeans make up a quarter of one town’s population. So many settlers have arrived in Boston, Lincolnshire, that 65 languages are spoken in a market town of only 70,000 inhabitants.’

The pro-diversity, pro-plurilingualism and pro-multilingualism discourse of the European Union is virtually unheard in the UK. The pro-languages discourse of Governmental and professional bodies, whether the *Dearing Report* (Dearing and King 2007) or the National Languages Strategy itself, receives scant coverage. Media handling of language topics is bedevilled by trivialisation or misrepresentation – we remember the cows with regional accents. Non-native speakers are demeaned or laughed at (Inspector Clouseau’s ‘bomb’, *Allô Allô*, *Engrish*, *Lost in Translation...*). Even normally serious newspapers adopt a facetious tone for language issues. *The Independent* (Paterson 2008) reported proposals to add a language dimension to the German constitution as a reaction to the incorporation of English words, from politicians ‘piqued to the point of carpet-biting indignation’; it listed several nouns under the heading ‘German: Who needs three short words when one really long one will do?’.

In 1985 – the year in which Fassbinder’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was transmitted in Britain in the original German – Channel 4 broadcast the French soap *Châteauvallon* in both dubbed and sub-titled versions. Such experiments are unthinkable today. Recent academic analyses confirm the media’s contribution to an environment in

which learning a foreign language is characterised as an unnecessary, hazardous and potentially ridiculous undertaking.

Newspapers are 'self-conscious loci of ideology production' (DiGiacomo 1999, 105) moulding and mirroring readers' perceptions and prejudices. A corpus-based analysis of the *Times* and *Guardian* (Ensslin & Johnson 2006) shows the consistent portrayal of English as a monolithic standard, and monolingualism as the norm. Television is characterised by the erasure of linguistic difference through selective editing, voice-over and other means, resulting in a 'minimization of the effects of linguistic difference in English-language broadcasting' (189). Even while setting aside comedic and fictional encounters between speakers of different languages, Gieve and Norton's (2007) analysis of factual, documentary and 'reality' programmes portrays an ideological representation of the world in which 'language is not a dimension of difference between people' (190). They describe eight strategies used by broadcasters to represent communication across linguistic difference, and conclude (207) that

In normal programming a monolingual world is largely assumed. Even in programmes when a multilingual environment is to be expected, the workings of cross-linguistic communication are largely avoided, eliminated or obscured. The impression given of speakers of other languages by the media is 'that it is not really worth the effort to communicate with such speakers' (210).

Jaworski goes further in asserting that reporting linked to the standard language ideology 'is always from the position of a threat to the accepted social, political and moral order' (2007, 272). Language difference in the British media is a justification for othering people in order to maintain an idealised, superior, homogeneous, mythical nation.

'The Other occupies the liminal status of those who are like 'us' and are not like 'us', being stereotyped, dehumanized, diminished, inferior, odd, irrational, exoticized and evil [...] users of 'lesser' languages are not fully human (like 'us').' (Jaworski 2007, 278)

Complementary data on how Britons perceive English and other languages is becoming available through the AHRC-funded BBC Voices research project at the University of Leeds (Turner 2008).

We can summarise by concluding that good news, which those involved in language teaching and learning do their best to promote, almost never reaches the screens or pages of the popular media, and when language issues **are** raised, it is to promote monolingual, normative, native-speaker English. Any country which perceives itself as monolingual will be at best apathetic and at worst hostile to the acquisition and use of other languages. The UK shares this damaging autostereotype with other Anglophone countries such as New Zealand, where language learning is under similar pressures (McLauchlan 2007). Data for the US shows the decline in specialist language degrees starting even earlier, from a high point in 1969-70.

The messages which society sends to English-speaking youth are not only xenophobic, but also highly gendered. As Carr and Pauwels (2006) show in their sensitive analysis of the gendered construction of language learning in Anglophone societies across the world, the classroom is a place where adolescents perform identities shaped by the tensions and contradictions of conflicting discourses, adopting those of society, family and peer group rather than those of officialdom, the

Government or the school. ‘Signals from the wider community that languages are (or are not) important are noted and internalised’ (2006, 3). If languages at school are seen as an essentially female choice (cf. summary in Coleman *et al.* 2007, 255), it is because ‘hegemonic masculinity of the variety offered and largely taken up in wider cultural contexts accords little importance to communication’ (2006, 40) and because boys know ‘the fear of being seen to engage in behaviour associated with girls’ (2006, 41).

Role models are role models because they embody qualities which society, with the help of the media, sees as desirable. ‘Current leaders in the major Anglophone countries [...] are for the most part unashamedly monolingual, unselfconsciously progressing their agendas of globalisation and internationalisation in English-only mode, apparently comfortable in the assumption that all business can be done this way. The occasional display of other-language proficiency by a high-profile figure [...] is cause for comment and surprise.’ (2006, 44). One recalls Tony Blair’s using fluent French soon after his landslide election in 1997, a performance not repeated until May 2007, when his fulsome congratulations on Sarkozy’s election coincided with his ambition to become European President.

The facts about Englishes

While the media peddle the myth of a universal English indistinguishable from the single variety shared by all British-born native speakers, the reality is of course very different.

Firstly, the native English speaker cannot be equated to the UK resident. The UK is multilingual. Well over two million residents declare non-British nationality or national identity, over two million speak a language at home which is not English, over three million were born in a country where English is not the national language. At the time of the 2006 survey (Coleman *et al.* 2007, 255), 12.5% of primary and 9.5% of secondary school pupils had English as an additional language. In 2008, those figures reached 14.4% and 10.8% respectively. In many schools, the ability to speak another language is promoted as a resource rather than a deficit. For example, Newbury Park’s Language of the Month (<http://www.newburypark.redbridge.sch.uk/langofmonth/>) showcases pupils as experts in their mother tongue. Contrast this with typical press coverage which problematises multilingualism, linking it to the xenophobic, anti-immigrant discourse illustrated above.

Secondly, English as a *lingua franca* is increasingly recognised alongside English for Native Speakers both as a valid learning target and as an international standard. Native-speaker British English, especially if it diverges from the standard, no longer has the privileged status in the world that it once did (Coleman, 2006, Graddol, 2007, Jenkins, 2007, Seidlhofer *et al.*, 2006).

Thirdly, 75% of the world’s inhabitants speak no English, and the majority of those who do also have one or more other languages – monolingualism is the exception rather than the norm, and jobseekers in the international market who speak only English are at a clear disadvantage. Some have explicitly recognised ‘the need to help UK students embrace a world in which neither their language nor their culture is a

measure of superiority' (Ramsden 2008, 12). Byrne (2008, 18) goes further: 'No monoglot British student can afford to ignore the fact that it is not just the lack of another language that puts them at a disadvantage; it is also a perceived linguistic and cultural insularity'.

We have a National Languages Strategy, but where does the Government really stand on the English language?

The 57 pages of the DIUS (Department for Industry, Universities and Skills) consultation paper *A vision for Science and Society. A consultation on developing a new strategy for the UK* (DIUS 2008) contain not a single mention of either 'language' or 'English'. We are fortunate indeed that all the world's scientists speak and publish only in English, and that a science policy document does not even need to consider non-issues such as language.

In December 2008, the UK's Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, asserted his intention to collaborate with the United States in order to regulate English-language websites by introducing global cinema-style age guidance. Despite his allusion to the incoming Obama Presidency, the notion has an inescapable flavour of past Imperialism, as if he felt entitled to regulate global machinery use because the steam engine also happened to originate in the British Isles. That a Government Minister should believe in Anglo-American ownership of global English is a measure of the extent of misunderstanding.

Conclusions?

'The endorsement of English as a language of power and social prestige appears to sanction the downwards trend in the institutionalised enthusiasm for, and encouragement of, foreign language education' (Ensslin & Johnson 2006, 179).

A new Key Stage 3 curriculum from 2008, new GCSE from 2009, and Diploma in Languages from 2011 demonstrate that, in British schools, new curricula and new measures of achievement are addressing some of the **intrinsic** issues which may have impacted negatively on students' motivation towards language learning. Bishop (2008, 99) additionally suggests that the decline in numbers might be partially redressed by dropping content-based syllabuses and instead 'allowing the learners much more say in what they learn and how they learn'.

Linguists will continue to support the individuals and initiatives which seek to bring language learning to the mainstream of educational ambitions. In addition to the various actions to promote language learning enumerated in Coleman *et al.* (2007, 252), CiLT, the National Centre for Languages, seeks to recruit celebrities to the cause of language learning

(<http://www.cilt.org.uk/promoting/celeblinguists/celeblinguists.htm>). Channel 4 encourages youngsters to *try life in another language* (<http://www.channel4.com/entertainment/t4/advertorial/try-life-in-another-language/index.html>). Good news stories do exist. In 2007-08, almost 600 centres used Asset Languages for external assessment, a rise of 64%, while orders for Teacher Assessment Packs increased by more than 200%. Despite the challenges of CVA (Contextual value added) and of maximising A and A* grades for the league

tables (Davies 2004), heads and governors of Language Colleges continue to try to bring 100% of pupils to GCSE in a first language and a 50% in a second.; 7% of all GCSE entrants now take two languages. *Our Languages* (<http://www.ourlanguages.org.uk/>) gives overdue recognition to community languages. *Routes into Languages*, the Government funded programme which aims to increase the take-up of languages from school to university is breaking new ground and making new links. Attitudes will be monitored: an adapted version of the Coleman *et al.* questionnaire is to be used within the *Routes into Languages* project. The Government-backed all-sector *Links into Languages* consortium promises further coordination at regional levels. Lessons may also be learnt from Spanish, where GCSE entries rose 7% between 2001 and 2007, retention from GCSE to A level is higher than for French or German, and growth is evidenced across all sectors from primary to tertiary. Parental demand, a certain cultural familiarity and accessibility, and a positive image of Spanish speakers, of Spain as holiday destination, and of the language as an international *lingua franca* useful for careers help to explain how Spanish has bucked the trend (Tinsley 2008).

But what of the **extrinsic** factors? We have failed to get across to Government, to public opinion or to the media the argument that bilingualism is a resource not a problem, that bilingualism raises cognitive standards and literacy, that the more other people learn English, the more the British need to learn foreign languages if we are not to lose out competitively as individuals and as a nation, that languages open doors to other cultures both friendly and potentially hostile.

It is time to debunk the spin which politicians, the media, the general public and even language professionals tend to adopt when talking about languages. The tired clichéd myths of a British public who are ‘no good at languages’, and the ‘English-is-enough’ monolingualism which are consistently reinforced and validated by the British media are false and must be challenged. Public opinion is shaped, not static. There is evidence in the widespread coverage of the May 2004 NIACE survey of the language skills of British MPs that language-positive stories are not impossible to place. We need to persist in trumpeting what is good, in challenging what is not – public opinion and ignorance, xenophobia, ‘foreign’ and ‘European’ as negatives, ‘English is enough’, and the reality rather than the spin of Government policies and strategies.

There is no doubting the commitment and energy of those at every level who are striving to implement the National Languages Strategy and help as many youngsters as possible to enjoy a positive experience of foreign language learning. However, a strategy which fails to challenge the way in which public discourse favours monolingualism is doomed to failure. I look forward to reading the views of practising teachers on both the likelihood that primary languages will effect a transformation, and on the reasons for declining take-up of languages at all stages of education in England.

We must challenge Government to acknowledge the declining international status of British English. When Government makes pronouncements or introduces policies which contradict the objectives of its own National Languages Strategy, we must point out the contradictions. The withdrawal of funding for higher education students following a course leading to Equal or Lower Qualifications (ELQ), for example, will damage not only the national skills agenda but also adult language learning.

The key sector, however, is primary, and at this level, Dearing (2008) suggests that the key actions are to make foreign languages compulsory, and to ensure appropriate transition from primary to secondary (cf. the concerns in Ofsted 2008). I share his fear that inconsistencies and disparate models of provision may begin to undermine the undoubted enthusiasm of pupils and teachers for primary languages. We are told that 84% of primary children now have the 'opportunity' of learning a language within class time. But why is it nearly always French? How much class time will the majority get, and from which teachers? Are arrangements in place for orderly transition to secondary? Macaro (2008: 106) is not alone in voicing genuine concerns, but how confident can we be that educational policy will ever be shaped by evidence?

How widely will ASSET Languages be taken up? There is already positive anecdotal evidence from secondary, for example at Castleford's Brigshaw High School (Brass, personal communication): 'We've found that ASSET has really helped us to improve motivation and increase attainment, especially with boys'. But if, as some early reports suggest, ASSET is not widely adopted in primary, and unassessed learners develop unrealistic expectations, then enjoyment of the novel classroom activities may not be enough to sustain motivation. There is even a danger that primary languages might squander the initial thrill which learners typically experience when starting foreign language study, making things even harder for secondary teachers. And can primary languages by themselves transform negative public opinion towards otherness? Many of those involved in implementing the policy are striving to involve parents from the start; but Enever (in press) argues from European comparisons that for primary languages to succeed 'a substantial shift in societal perceptions is necessary'.

Sceptics may still see the introduction of primary languages itself as the Government's quid-pro-quo, albeit a delayed one, for removing statutory provision at Key Stage 4. They may suggest that a commitment to primary languages as an entitlement is not the same as a commitment to ensuring primary languages have adequate curricular integration and teaching time, and proper transition arrangements to secondary. They may recall how, in 2005, the Government reacted to plummeting numbers at Key Stage 4 by requiring schools to set a benchmark for take-up, and note how the majority of schools have been allowed to ignore the requirement (Ofsted, 2008, 6). Will a Government with a National Languages Strategy actually 'walk the talk'?

'As language professionals, parents, students, people who understand the need to respond to the intellectual and cultural requirements of changing global conditions, we have to do something. [...] to keep the argument out in the public arena; to insist more loudly and from an informed position about the need for change.' (Carr and Pauwels 2006: 194). Those who are committed to language learning must continue to

- challenge the deceptive 'English-is-enough' message
- disseminate good news stories celebrating the value of language skills
- monitor the performance of Government Departments responsible for languages to ensure that desirable initiatives are effectively followed up
- monitor Government as a whole and criticise policies which erase language as an issue, or assume universal, problem-free use of standardised, uniform English

- challenge the portrayal in the British media of the UK as an insular, monolingual community with no desire or need for change.

References

- Bishop, G. (2008) Personalising learning: content, assessment and language enrichment, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 2 (1), 83-100.
- Byrne, N. (2008) Another way to learn, *The Linguist*, 47 (2), 18-19.
- Carr, J. & Pauwels, A. (2006) *Boys and foreign language learning. Real boys don't do languages* (London, Palgrave Macmillan).
- CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2003) *Language Trends* (London: CiLT). Available online at: <http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/languagetrends/2003/Languagetrends2003.pdf> (accessed 11 January 2009).
- CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2004) *Language Trends* (London: CiLT). Available online at: <http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/languagetrends/2004/languagetrends2004.pdf> (accessed 11 January 2009).
- CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2005) *Language Trends* (London: CiLT). Available online at: http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/languagetrends/2005/trends2005_ks4.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2006) *Language Trends* (London: CiLT). Available online at http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/languagetrends/2006/trends2006_ks4.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2007) *Language Trends* (London: CiLT). Available online at: http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/languagetrends/2007/trends2007_statistical_report.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2008) *Language Trends* (London: CiLT). Available online at: <http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/languagetrends/2008/Language%20Trends%202008.pdf> (accessed 11 January 2009).
- Coleman, J. A. (2002) Strategies for Survival: reprofiling language provision in higher education. Unpublished plenary paper delivered to SCHML conference, January 2002.
- Coleman, J. A. (2004) Modern Languages in British Universities: Past and Present, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 3 (2), 149-164.

- Coleman, J. A. (2006) English-medium teaching in European higher education, *Language Teaching*, 39 (1), 1-14.
- Coleman, J. A. (in press) Multilingualism in contexts: the relativity of time and space, in: W. Wiater & G. Videsott (Eds) *Migration und Mehrsprachigkeit. Von der individuellen zur gesellschaftlichen Mehrsprachigkeit* (Bern, Peter Lang).
- Coleman, J. A., Galaczi, A. & Astruc, L. (2007) Motivation of UK school pupils towards foreign languages: a large-scale survey at Key Stage 3, *Language Learning Journal*, 35 (2), 245-280.
- Council of Europe (2008) *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the use of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CFER) and the promotion of plurilingualism*. Available online at: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Conventions_EN.asp (accessed 11 January 2009).
- Daddow, O. J. (2006) Euroscepticism and the culture of the discipline of history, *Review of International Studies*, 32, 309-328.
- Davies, P. I., Telhaj, S., Hutton, D., Adnett, N. & Coe, R. (2004) Institutional and social background effects on the probability of taking an examination subject at age 16. Paper presented to BERA conference 2004. Available online at: <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/schools/business/iepr/docs/Working-paper14.doc> (accessed 11 January 2009).
- Dearing, R. (2008) Action on the *Languages Review*, *Language Learning Journal*, 36 (1), 97-100.
- Dearing, R. & King, L. (2007) *Languages Review* (London: Department for Education and Skills).
- De Bot, K. (2007) Language teaching in a changing world, *Modern Language Journal*, 91 (2), 274-276.
- Department for Industry, Universities and Science (2008) *A vision for Science and Society. A consultation on developing a new strategy for the UK*. Available online at: http://www.dius.gov.uk/consultations/documents/A_Vision_for_Science_and_Society.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- DiGiacomo, S. M. (1999) Language ideological debates in an Olympic city: Barcelona 1992-1996, in: J. Blommaert (Ed.) *Language Ideological Debates* (Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter), 105-142.
- Dörnyei, Z. & Czisér, K. (2002) Some dynamics of language attitudes and motivation: results of a longitudinal nationwide survey, *Applied Linguistics*, 23 (4), 421-462.
- Dutton. M. & Meyer, S. (2007) *Figures of Speech* (Leicester: NIACE).

- Enever, J. (in press) Can today's early language learners in England become tomorrow's plurilingual European citizens? in: M. Nikolov (Ed.) *Early Learning of Modern Foreign Languages: Processes and Outcomes* (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters).
- Ensslin, A. & Johnson, S. (2006) Language in the news: investigating representations of 'Englishness' using *WordSmith Tools, Corpora*, 1 (2), 153-185.
- Eurobarometer (2006) *Europeans and their languages*. Special Eurobarometer 243. Available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- European Commission (2008a) *Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training: indicators and benchmarks*. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities. Available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/progress08/report_en.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- European Commission (2008b) *The European Parliament*. Special Barometer 288. Available online at: http://www.ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_288_en.pdf (accessed 11 January 2009).
- Gieve, S. and Norton, J. (2007) Dealing with linguistic difference in encounters with Others on British television. In S. Johnson & A. Ensslin (Eds) *Language and the Media* (London, Continuum), 188-210.
- Graddol, D. (2006) *English Next* (London:, The British Council).
- Graham, S. (2004) Giving up on Modern Foreign Languages? Students' perceptions of learning French, *Modern Language Journal*, 88 (ii), 171-191.
- Jaworski, A. (2007) Language in the media: authenticity and othering, in: S. Johnson & A. Ensslin (Eds) *Language and the Media* (London, Continuum), 271-280.
- Jenkins, J. (2007). *English as a Lingua Franca: attitude and identity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Lightfoot, L. (2008) ¿Puede leer este titular? Si no, esta es la razón... *The Observer*, 3 August 2008.
- McLauchlan, A. (2007) *The negative L2 climate: understanding attrition among second language students* (Napier, New Zealand: Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education).
- Macaro, E. (2008) The decline in language learning in England: getting the facts right and getting real, *Language Learning Journal*, 36 (10), 101-108.
- Macaro, E. & Erler, L. (2008) Raising the achievement of young-beginner readers of French through strategy instruction, *Applied Linguistics*, 29 (1), 90-119.

Marshall, K. (2000a) What turns them on and what turns them off? Factors influencing pupils' decisions whether or not to take a foreign language to A level and beyond, in: G. Chambers (Ed.) *Reflections on motivation* (London, CILT), 51-60.

Marshall. K. (2000b) Babel rebuilt? *Guardian Education*, 12 December 2000.

Ofsted (2008) *The changing landscape of languages. An evaluation of language learning 2004/2007*. Available online at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/The-changing-landscape-of-languages> (accessed 11 January 2009).

Paterson, T. (2008) Sprechen Sie Deutsch? Germans campaign to safeguard language. *The Independent*, 16 December 2008.

Ramsden, P. (2008) *The future of higher education. Teaching and the student experience* (York, Higher Education Academy). Available online at: <http://www.channel4.com/entertainment/t4/advertorial/try-life-in-another-language/index.html> (accessed 11 January 2009).

Seidlhofer, B., Breiteneder, A. & Pitzl, M. L. (2006) English as a Lingua Franca in Europe: challenges for Applied Linguistics, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 3-34.

Tinsley, T. (2008) Think global, act local: how Spanish can provide us with keys to reviving language learning, *Vida Hispánica*, 38, 19-24.

Turner, W. (2008) Multilingual nation? Representations of multilingualism on the message boards of the BBC Voices website. Paper presented to AILA conference, University of Essen, August 2008.

UNESCO (1997) *International Standard Classification of Education*. Available online at: http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced_1997.htm (accessed 11 January 2009).

Table 1: Present linguistic incompetence, past educational failure: percentage of adults unable to hold a conversation except in their mother tongue

Ireland	66%
United Kingdom	62%
Italy	59%
Portugal	58%
Hungary	58%
Spain	56%
France	49%
Poland	43%
Greece	43%
Czech Republic	39%
Austria	38%
Germany	33%
Finland	31%
Belgium	26%
Cyprus	22%
Denmark	12%
Estonia	11%
Sweden	10%
Slovenia	9%
Netherlands	9%
Malta	8%
Lithuania	8%
Latvia	5%
Slovakia	3%
Luxembourg	1%

Source: *Eurobarometer* 2006.

Table 2: Future linguistic incompetence, present educational failure: average number of foreign languages studied at school, in lower secondary education

	ISCED Level 2 (GCSE*)
United Kingdom	0.6
Ireland	1.0
Hungary	1.0
Poland	1.1
Austria	1.1
Czech Republic	1.1
Slovakia	1.2
Germany	1.3
Bulgaria	1.3
Slovenia	1.3
Belgium	1.3
Spain	1.4
France	1.5
Latvia	1.6
Italy	1.7
Sweden	1.7
Lithuania	1.8
Portugal	1.9
Greece	1.9
Cyprus	1.9
Romania	2.0
Denmark	2.0
Estonia	2.0
Malta	2.2
Finland	2.2
Luxembourg	2.5
Netherlands	2.7

Source: European Commission 2008a

Table 3: Future linguistic incompetence, present educational failure: average number of foreign languages studied at school, in higher secondary education

	ISCED Level 3 (A-level*)
United Kingdom	0.1
Portugal	0.7
Ireland	0.9
Malta	1.0
Greece	1.1
Spain	1.2
Italy	1.3
Hungary	1.4
Germany	1.4
Lithuania	1.6
Cyprus	1.7
Poland	1.8
Bulgaria	1.8
Latvia	1.8
Austria	1.9
Romania	1.9
Slovakia	2.0
France	2.0
Slovenia	2.0
Czech Republic	2.1
Sweden	2.1
Denmark	2.2
Belgium	2.2
Estonia	2.3
Netherlands	2.6
Finland	2.7
Luxembourg	3.0

Source: European Commission 2008a

* ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels 2 and 3 (UNESCO 1997) correspond approximately to pre-GCSE and post-GCSE.