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Modern Languages in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The article supplies an overview of UK modern languages education at school and university level. It attends particularly to trends over recent years, with regard both to numbers and to social elitism, and reflects on perceptions of language learning in the wider culture and the importance of gaining wider recognition of the value of languages education.

Keywords: elitism, modern languages education, primary school, secondary school, university

No university can escape the prejudices and politics of the society in which it is located, and as tuition fees rise to one-third of average annual wage, English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face unprecedented uncertainty, in markets more unfettered than ever before. British adults lead Europe in their linguistic incompetence, while at the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 2 (GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education) and 3 (A level) UK pupils have less contact with other languages than anywhere else in Europe (Coleman 2009). Most public opinion is monolingualist, its views shaped and echoed by a xenophobic media. Two analyses (Ensslin and Johnson 2006, Gieve and Norton 2007) show how the printed and broadcast media portray languages not as a resource but a problem, or simply not as an issue at all. With parents often indifferent or even hostile to language learning, and politicians under little pressure from constituents to look beyond national borders, small wonder that language teachers face challenges.

At primary level in England (the UK's other nations face different issues), the previous Labour Government, to balance its removal of compulsory languages from the upper secondary curriculum, in 2002 promised to introduce by 2010 an 'entitlement' to languages in Key Stage 2 (KS2, ages 7 to 11). The change of Government in May 2010 led to the abandonment of plans to make primary languages mandatory, while the current National Curriculum review makes policy uncertain at all levels. Meanwhile 92% of primaries offer a timetabled language, although few reach the recommended minimum of one hour a week. French dominates teaching provision, while huge local variation is compounded by the absence of a coherent transition to secondary.

At KS3 (ages 11 to 14) languages remain compulsory but are losing timetable share, while at KS4 (14 to 16), since their mandatory status was abandoned, take-up has fallen dramatically, with only one-third of state schools pupils having 50% of pupils studying a language (CILT 2011). The proportion sitting a language at GCSE level (age 16) was down from 71% in 1997 to 43% in 2010, while at AS (Advanced Subsidiary) level (age 17) overall numbers are down 9% since 2007. At A level (age 18), numbers are falling in German, but stable in French and rising in Spanish. Grades at all levels have risen consistently as languages become the preserve of a social and intellectual elite. With 7% of the total number of school pupils in the UK, independent

schools represent 29.7%, 27.2%, and 34.2% of A-level entries in French, German and Spanish respectively, but 42.9%, 42.5% and 48.5% of top grades.

Recruitment to Modern Language degrees in the UK peaked in 1992, and the ensuing crisis saw courses and whole departments closed. But we have now seen a small but consistent year-on-year increase on undergraduate degrees since 2004, as multiple cross-sector initiatives by academics and students have convinced young people of the value of language study. However, language students are concentrated in ever fewer universities, especially the elite Russell Group (20 universities), whose 'premium brand' prestige attaches primarily to research rankings and graduate employability. Curriculum innovation, often originating in less august and now-closed departments, has refreshed the syllabus in all. The Open University, which did not offer languages in 1992, now recruits 10,000 students a year. Non-language specialists increasingly recognise the importance of language skills, and registrations at Language Centres are buoyant.

As higher education costs shift from state to individual, it is more crucial than ever to demonstrate the value of what we do. In research, UK-authored studies of the literatures and cultures of other countries, and the UK-based journals in which they appear, are held in high international esteem. We can show world-leading research-based and theory-driven innovations in language teaching.

Today, of all university disciplines, languages has the highest percentage of students from independent, fee-paying schools. We may either passively lament this elitism, or argue that if those lucky enough to be able to buy social capital choose to invest in their children's foreign language skills, maybe they are worthwhile for everyone.

In the short term, we must continue to stress the benefits to individuals, companies and the nation of high-level language competences. Longer term, we must try to turn public opinion in favour of languages in the same way it has turned in recent decades against smoking or homophobia. No small challenge – but a worthwhile one.

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