



CONSULTATION WITH MEMBERS SEPTEMBER 2010

'Monolingualism should be seen as the exception, not multilingualism'

(Teacher of French in Lancashire)

'A language is not just for a holiday but for life'

(Teacher of Italian in London)

The Association for Language Learning is the major subject association for teachers of languages and language professionals in the UK. Its patron is Professor David Crystal and it has some 5000 individual, group and corporate members.

In the week beginning 20 September 2010 the Association carried out a wide-ranging consultation exercise with its members, inviting their thoughts on the current state of language teaching in the UK, on government policy for languages and its implementation in schools and other educational institutions, and on the public perception of language learning. Over seven days responses poured in from individual members and from regional networks of ALL following specially convened meetings of members. There were replies from every educational sector from primary schools to universities, from independent as well as maintained schools, and from every area of the country, from Berwick-on-Tweed to Maidstone, Liverpool to Norwich. We set out below a summary of the main points emerging from this exercise. It offers a frank, up-to-the-minute snapshot of language learning and teaching in the UK as seen by professionals involved in it 'on the ground'.

Morale among language teachers

'All we want is to teach the subject we love'

(Teacher of French and German in Cheshire)

Judging from the consultation as a whole, language teachers feel passionately about their subject. Despite recent disappointments and setbacks they remain committed believers in the educational value of language learning for individuals and its economic importance to the nation. They are proud of their achievements as a profession: the successful development of language teaching in primary schools and the support given to it by teachers in Language Colleges and other secondary schools; the creation of new modules of work and resources reflecting the contemporary interests of young people; the utilisation of the latest means of communication such as podcasts and blogs as well as the exploitation of all forms of modern technology to enliven language teaching; their struggle to sustain exchanges with schools abroad and to maximise the cultural as well as the linguistic benefits; and the imaginative use of foreign languages to teach other subjects across the curriculum.

It is clear that language teachers in Britain are dedicated, active and innovative, but the consultation also showed that they are frustrated by working in an environment which impedes them and in some cases appears hostile. They are particularly resentful of politicians who in public statements endorse the value of languages but in practice knowingly

put structures and systems in place which obstruct or even prevent successful language teaching. They also believe that there is widespread prejudice and even ignorance in the community at large about the nature of present-day language teaching and its value, and they are agreed that as a profession they need to undertake an urgent campaign to enlighten the public. They want to cut red tape and they long to be liberated from assessment procedures and examination requirements which stifle their creativity and enthusiasm.

National policy

‘Why does just about everyone in government (of any colour) express their support for languages, while doing so little in practice to boost them in our schools, colleges and universities?’

(Teacher of French in HE in the North of England)

Many language teachers still believe that it was a mistake to make languages optional in Key Stage 4, and some would like to restore the compulsory status of the subject. They report that, rightly or wrongly, languages are widely considered to be more difficult than other subjects, so that pupils do not elect to take them at GCSE. This problem is compounded by the fact that many schools now provide a much larger range of subjects at GCSE, some of them vocational or modular. Teachers also report that some headteachers and senior management teams in schools share the belief that it is difficult to achieve high grades in languages and are therefore encouraging pupils to opt for other subjects or even phasing languages out of the school curriculum altogether. These developments seem to occur without any regard to the academic importance and value of languages and to reflect a narrow focus on examination results and league tables.

One teacher summed the problem up as follows. ‘Governments claim abolishing languages at GCSE gives pupils “more choice”. But if you can predict that they will make the wrong choice and then blame teachers and pupils, that is highly cynical’.

Some teachers said in their responses that they had been willing to accept the end of compulsory languages at Key Stage 4 in view of the introduction of languages at primary level and the previous government’s commitment to making it compulsory from 2011. Now, with the new coalition government’s apparent reluctance to endorse this commitment, they feel threatened by a ‘double-whammy’ and fear that languages may disappear altogether from maintained schools.

No single topic elicited so much comment as the present uncertainty surrounding languages in primary schools. Many respondents emphasised how much had been achieved over the last few years in building up languages at primary level and in planning for the transition from primary to secondary languages. There was both apprehension that these achievements may now be under threat and anger that much (publicly funded) effort might have been wasted. Secondary school teachers reported marked improvements in their students due to previous experience of primary languages. The Head of German in a grammar school in Kent wrote: ‘The “Knowledge About Language” and “Language Learning Strategies” strands in primary schools have been feeding into children’s literacy, and over the last five years I have seen pupils coming through with a far better understanding of their own language and how to learn another’.

Within primary schools there seem also to have been huge benefits to pupils from learning languages. From Liverpool it was reported that children in primary schools have achieved excellent results in Asset Languages tests, with some attaining grades equivalent to the higher grades of GCSE. A primary school teacher in Leicester stated that grammatical points made relating to a foreign language often clear up uncertainties about English and that language learning stimulates children’s curiosity about the history and culture of other countries and the differences from their own world.

A teacher in Bedfordshire summed up as follows: ‘Primary languages are on the cusp of succeeding but are now in a perilous situation if the government doesn’t make them statutory.’

Primary languages need to be sustained by a positive, clear statement that the government still intends to take the initiative forward and by continued funding and support. It would be a national disgrace if primary languages were to become the preserve of the leafy suburbs and independent schools’.

Such fears about languages becoming an elite subject were widespread. Many secondary teachers felt that only a small minority of students, usually the brightest and/or those from middle-class backgrounds, were now studying a language beyond 14. The same applied to exchanges with schools abroad, which some teachers felt might become the prerogative of independent schools.

Some schools are managing to continue running exchanges – one teacher in St Albans had participated in an exciting exchange with China – but in general exchanges seem to be under threat due to cost and nervousness about the safety of students. A number of teachers stressed the value, in intercultural as well as linguistic terms, of allowing students to encounter speakers of other languages in their own social milieu. More than one respondent said that their colleagues in other countries do not understand why the British appear so nervous about their children staying abroad. The diminishing number of foreign language assistants due to lack of funding has also meant fewer opportunities for students to engage with native speakers, something which was felt to be essential for good A level work.

School Policies

‘Over the last decade or two the work of teachers in classrooms has been made increasingly hard by totally unfair and demoralising demands and pressures’

(Head of Languages in an independent school in Surrey)

It emerged from the consultation that language teachers understand the pressures which headteachers and senior management teams are under to maximise their school’s performance in league tables. However, teachers also feel that too often schools give in to such pressures at the cost of academic integrity. They complain that languages are sometimes deliberately placed in blocks of options in such a way as to discourage students from choosing them. They also report that in timetables too few hours – particularly in comparison to schools abroad – are allocated to language classes or that the few lessons available to them are timed unfavourably, for example only two lessons per week and both on the same day. It appears that school leaders, particularly since the end of compulsory languages, have had less respect for languages than other subjects and that this low esteem has communicated itself to pupils, resulting for instance in the neglect of languages homework.

The practice of using national curriculum levels – and so-called ‘sub-levels’ - to measure attainment was much criticised. Teachers argue that these levels were intended only as indicators of students’ summative performance and not as a regular yardstick for formative progress. The insistence on applying these levels was not only felt to be another example of the general obsession with assessment but was regarded as especially inappropriate in language learning.

Examinations

‘Language teaching has become more stimulating, varied and imaginative. If pupils are put off languages, it is more likely due to examination syllabuses. Many teachers have felt pressured into restricting the content of their lessons to “what is likely to come up in the exam”, for fear of jeopardising their school’s league table performance’

(Teacher of French and Spanish in Further Education in the North West)

There was much criticism in the consultation of examinations which encourage memorised learning instead of spontaneous use of the target language. The recent introduction of ‘controlled assessments’ in place of coursework was a particular target. It was pointed out

that these assessments reduce the time available in class for teaching and cause students to concentrate on the topics examined in them to the detriment of the wider knowledge they used to gain through coursework for the GCSE in its previous form. It was also argued that the need to arrange controlled assessments discouraged schools from entering candidates for community languages.

In general language teachers felt that there was too much and too frequent assessment of students, which inhibited the creative kinds of language work they wanted to initiate. Complaints about restrictive pressures on teachers were also made about OFSTED, which is said only to favour a certain narrow range of approved teaching procedures in languages.

There was praise for the new content-free secondary curriculum, but criticism of the new GCSE on the grounds that it was too difficult in comparison to other subjects. A number of teachers argued that all students should be required to take a language qualification but that in many cases it could be an NVQ or other accreditation rather than GCSE.

A very large number of language teachers take the view that examination performances in languages are more severely graded than other subjects. They cite cases where for no apparent reason individual pupils or whole sets of examination entrants have received lower grades in languages than in other subjects sat. They claim that examination boards and the former Department for Education and Skills have refused to recognise this inequality even when presented with statistical and other hard evidence of its existence.

Adult Education

'The funding cuts being made now will have such a detrimental effect that languages in adult education will never be able to recover'

(Teacher of French in Adult Education in Sussex)

There were complaints about repeated restructuring and about inflexibility and bureaucracy in the administration of language classes in Adult Education. A series of teachers lamented the withdrawal of funding for non-accredited language courses and the lack of access to training for teachers in the AE sector. They argued that demand for adult language classes was high but could no longer be met. They also pointed out that the opportunity to learn or brush up a language is crucial at a time when language provision in secondary schools is shrinking. It seems that lack of funding results in some classes being cancelled before learners settle into the correct level while so-called 'leisure' classes are being discontinued altogether.

Universities

'Languages at degree level are too important nationally to leave in the hands of individual vice-chancellors'

(University Lecturer in French in London)

In recent years universities up and down the country have been closing language departments, on the grounds of falling demand, ending either the teaching of a particular language or of languages altogether. At the time of the present consultation, for example, Swansea University is controversially planning to close its very successful German Department. Language teachers believe that the government should intervene to prevent the disappearance of specialist languages from HE in some areas of the country.

Language teachers welcome the growth of non-specialist 'languages for all' programmes at universities, but point out that that specialist language degree programmes are essential in order to produce the next generation of language teachers.

The Public Perception of Language Learning

'Parents seem to imagine that language classes are about copying verb tables written on a blackboard by dull teachers in academic gowns'

(Provider of French and Spanish in nursery schools, based in Yorkshire)

There were complaints that sections of the press promote xenophobic attitudes and foster ignorance about the value of language learning, encouraging the mistaken view that 'everybody speaks English nowadays'. Press coverage about languages always seemed to report bad news. It was felt that there is a common misconception that the British as a nation are 'no good at languages'. A languages advisor in Bristol commented that 'the English behave with regard to languages as they do with Maths - almost proud to say that they "can't do them"'.

Teachers said that such prejudices were to be found in all sections of the community, including some school governing bodies, and were common amongst parents. They reported that many parents seemed unaware of the value of languages in breaking down intercultural barriers or of the importance of languages in a competitive global economy. Parents also seemed to know little about the many changes in language teaching over the last decades: communicative approaches, multimedia language learning suites replacing traditional language laboratories, the use of authentic and contemporary foreign language texts, increased emphasis on oral work, role plays, computer-assisted language learning, work with the internet, podcasts and blogs, content and language integrated learning.

However, most respondents did not just complain about this situation. Instead, a succession of teachers argued that language teachers themselves had to go out and explain the importance of languages and the advances made recently in teaching them. No one else would do it. They felt that there was a need to educate the public – MPs, councillors, school governors, and especially parents. One teacher said that to allow languages to decline without such a campaign would be to 'disempower and disenfranchise our young people'. Pleas to 'make the case' and 'promote languages to decision-makers' were frequent in the consultation. A teacher of French and Spanish in Oxfordshire just asked 'how do we get to parents?'

The Future

Two clear conclusions emerged from the consultation.

1. **Government** needs to accept its responsibility for the preservation of national language skills rather than leaving it to market forces or in the hands of headteachers and students. Members in Sheffield remarked that government, having made languages optional in the 14-16 curriculum, is in danger of leaving the future of the nation's capability in languages to the whim of 14-year-olds. There is a need for joined-up thinking and real direction of policy. The coalition government should confirm the commitment to make primary languages statutory.

2. **Language teachers themselves** have to campaign for languages and educate the public about it. They have to go out into the 'big society' and market their subject.

'We as a body of professionals need to get together and say what we believe are the most effective pedagogical approaches to language learning, reflect on [...] our own practice and then tell the exam boards what and how they should be assessing. We are the people we have been waiting for'

(Head of Languages at a secondary school in the North East)