

15/06/15

Dear Mr Gibb,

Re: the government's plans to reinforce the importance of a core academic curriculum

Aspects of your announcement about proposals for languages in GCSE will be applauded by many language teachers in the country, keen to assert the importance of languages throughout the school years. Many language initiatives have suffered because of the decision, in 2004, to remove languages from the statutory curriculum in Key Stage 4. As a subject association we do recognise in this move a genuine attempt by the minister and the government to recognise the importance of language learning and to re-position the unique knowledge and skills it brings at the heart of the 7 to 16 curriculum.

What we can see is that this is a “Languages for All - bar a few” policy, the few being those on the SEN register. This in itself is a contentious point, as we know how successful many of those labelled with “SEN” can actually be when studying a language. My own experience as a language teacher, head of department and teacher trainer has shown me how pupils on that register can be successful in language lessons, adding not just to their academic achievement but also to their personal development. Earlier this week I had the opportunity to listen to some NQTs reflecting on their first year as language teachers. One of them was greatly enthused by the fact that she introduced German into a special educational needs unit within her school setting and described how positively the pupils reacted.

Putting the potential cohort of pupils aside, I am pleased to read that the introduction of compulsory languages should not be rushed. In order to make this new policy work it is important to ask and discuss the following questions:

How does the policy behind this announcement address the challenges the language and education community will face?

Where will the language teachers come from? We already know that over the last two years recruitment targets to allocated initial teacher training places weren't met (16% allocated places for the 2014-15 cohort were not filled; source: NCTL Recruitment Team). In addition, we will have lost some along the way while training and studying. The forecast regarding recruitment for the coming academic year is definitely no better; initial figures show a decline in applications to date.

Where will the resources come from? Considering the minister's remarks on textbooks as well as forecasted school budget cuts (in real terms) of 10% to 12%, how will the 'average' school fund these resources – not just for languages but for any other subject in the curriculum?

Is a single more rigorous GCSE exam the right qualification for this “Languages for All - bar a few” policy? Should we in the 21st century not be more creative with our assessments and develop, or reinstate, appropriate assessments for diverse learners, in order to ensure that everyone involved stays fully motivated?

And then there is the stick for school leaders, that, where participation figures do not improve, a top grading for a school will no longer be possible. We must wonder if this stick approach is going to motivate and encourage a positive working culture both in language departments and amongst teachers and leaders in general?

Are we not running the danger once again of forcing something onto some schools too quickly – might a slightly slower and step-by-step approach be a better way forward? Change is needed, but rather than forcing change onto everyone, let's ensure that change is fully understood, embraced and driven by the school and its culture, and by families, rather than by external targets and measurements.

Once again, on a personal note, I welcome the announcement of making languages more or less compulsory in Key Stage 4 - my worry is that once again the implementation plan and its effects, both immediate and long-term, have not been thought through.

It is time to engage actively in a discussion with practitioners, school leaders, researchers and subject associations to make this a successful change experience and not one that will be stopped by demotivated teachers and pupils as well as frustrated school leaders and parents.

The Association for Language Learning (ALL) represents around 5,000 language teachers across the country and would wish to be actively involved in moving this initiative forward.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mr René Koglbauer'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'R' and 'K'.

Mr René Koglbauer, MA, MBA
President of the Association for Language Learning (ALL)