

LANGUAGES: EVIDENCE FOR THE E-BAC INQUIRY FROM THE ASSOCIATION FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Recommendations: Executive Summary

- The current proposal for the E-Bac should be retained, with a foreign language as one of the core subjects. We believe this will encourage more students to study languages at senior secondary levels in order to increase languages capability nationally.
- The proposal regarding the choice of languages to be included in the award should be retained, i.e. any language for which a GCSE examination exists, with the exception of GCSEs in Applied French and Applied Welsh 2nd Language.
- Steps should be taken to protect the position of successful and rigorous alternative awards such as the NVQ in languages.
- ALL, working with a range of partners, should be asked to put forward ideas for new GCSE criteria to provide a more intellectually stimulating syllabus and examination
- The government should consider the implications of the E-Bac with regard to the number of specialist language teachers in the workforce. There is already a shortage of specialist linguists in schools, and we know from preparations already being made in schools for the next academic year that there will be a significant increase in the amount of language teaching. If the E-Bac is introduced as proposed, it will need to be backed by strong policies on the recruitment of well qualified, well-trained teachers with the subject knowledge, teaching expertise and experience to carry it through to a high standard
- Head teachers should be made aware of the need to strengthen subject-based CPD for languages staff, for example, by encouraging membership of their subject association and supporting participation in activities aimed at improving teachers' subject knowledge.
- Schools should be made to consider their responsibility in relation to provision for languages in the timetable (i.e. number of hours, regularity and continuity) to ensure excellent and sustained provision and high pupil achievement.

1. General

1.1 The Association for Language Learning (ALL) broadly approves of the introduction of the E-Bac, especially in its aim to encourage a balanced curriculum in secondary schools. We endorse the Government's concern for well founded educational values and ourselves wish to halt the drift away from what are sometimes seen as more academic and more 'difficult' subjects. We welcome the encouragement to all children to achieve their full potential and believe that all children should have the opportunity to learn languages from an

early age and that coherent, relevant and progressive programmes of language learning should be available throughout all phases of their education and training.

1.2 ALL is however concerned about some aspects of the implementation of the E-Bac.

1.3 Our submission focuses on only one aspect of the E-Bac inquiry, the inclusion of a language in the E-Bac. ALL believes that the Government has made the correct decision in making a language one of the five subjects to be included. This submission provides the rationale for our view.

2. The present position: a challenge

2.1 The last ten years have seen a serious decline in the number of pupils learning languages at KS4. The decline has arisen in part from the decision of the previous government to make languages an optional subject at this Key Stage. Since the decision was implemented in September 2004, ALL has consistently voiced anxiety about the number of pupils, many of them high attainers, dropping languages at the end of KS3. Since 2003 an annual survey, *Language Trends* (http://www.cilt.org.uk/research_and_statistics.aspx), conducted by CILT, the National Centre for Languages in collaboration with ALL and the Independent Schools Modern Languages Association, has tracked a steady decrease in the number of pupils studying languages at KS4 and more recently – most strikingly in 2010 - a worrying decline in pupil contact time in languages at KS3.

Participation in language learning has fallen for a number of reasons. These include:

- pupils restricted to choosing a very small number of options from a very wide range of subjects
- the supposed difficulty of studying languages
- pressure on curriculum time and inadequate time devoted to languages at KS3
- severe grading at GCSE where it has been demonstrated that it is more difficult to achieve a high grade in languages than in many other subjects (http://www.all-london.org.uk/severe_grading.htm)
- intense pressure on schools to achieve five A* - C grades at GCSE, with pupils being directed towards 'softer' subjects. This is often most obvious in schools in more challenging circumstances: participation in language learning by pupils in lower social groups and inner city areas is particularly low, as revealed in the *Language Trends* surveys.

2.2 This decline has been the subject of much policy discussion and numerous support strategies from government, national agencies and other organisations, including our own. There is much good and some outstanding practice in those schools that continue to offer languages. However, initiatives to improve provision and increase participation have on the whole been unsuccessful in the face of structures so heavily weighted against them. Language learning at KS3 and KS4 has become increasingly marginalised in schools and in some cases has been completely lost at KS4.

2.3 The major challenge now is to reverse the decline and encourage more young people to choose languages at KS4. An English Baccalaureate which includes a language will certainly provide the opportunity for a revival of language learning at KS4. It will also have a backwash effect on KS3 and could have an impact on numbers opting to continue to study languages at KS5.

3. Language learning as part of a broad and balanced curriculum

3.1 ALL believes in a broad and balanced general education for all.

3.2 In the last few years, despite substantial investment in education and well intentioned initiatives to improve achievement, there has been a tendency for schools to lose sight of general educational aspirations in the drive to achieve targets and manage performance.

3.3 In a fragile yet increasingly interconnected and independent world, we believe that there is a powerful case for learning languages. Language learning should arguably form a part of compulsory education at every stage, and its inclusion in the secondary curriculum is of paramount importance. It may be difficult to predict the future language requirements that learners may need in their personal and professional lives but language learning in school should equip learners with fluency in at least one major language other than English and provide the necessary language learning skills and knowledge about language to enable them to learn other languages as required. .

3.4 The current loss of capability in languages is likely to have a major impact on the UK economy and on our role in international affairs. The inclusion of a language in the E-Bac, as well as having intrinsic value, will have a number of positive effects, strengthening languages at KS3 and encouraging primary schools which have made a start on language learning to continue. The sustainability of primary languages is especially prescient as many primary schools, having introduced primary languages first as an entitlement and then in the expectation that primary languages would become compulsory from 2011, are now unsure of their future status in the curriculum review. Language learning for the E-Bac should build on the solid foundation that primary languages can provide.

3.5 We have noted with concern that language skills are becoming increasingly the preserve of the middle classes. Almost all pupils in independent schools study languages up to GCSE, they account for around 30% of A level entries (although only some 7% of the entire A level cohort are in independent schools), and take nearly 50% of the top A level grades. At university level Modern Languages has a higher level of students from independent schools than any other discipline. If the E-Bac becomes the award of choice for most state schools, this trend should be reversed.

4. Why all pupils should learn languages

4.1 Language is a uniquely human attribute which identifies us as individuals, as communities, and as nations. All human beings are capable of learning other languages. The ability to express ourselves clearly and creatively in our own language, or in the language of schooling, is fundamental to successful education. The more we understand about language - our own and those of others - the more we are able to reflect on our own culture.

4.2 Language learning has significant educational benefits:

- developing communication skills
- promoting literacy, both in English and in the language of study
- strengthening understanding and knowledge of the nature of language and communication
- strengthening intellectual and analytical capabilities (e.g. engaging with different ways of making meaning)
- strengthening cognitive and general learning capabilities, such as creative and critical thinking

- strengthening the knowledge and understanding of concepts across the curriculum
- enriching understanding of other subjects (e.g. studying resources in other languages)
- empathy with, and understanding of other ways of living and thinking

4.3 Language learning also brings valuable personal benefits:

- the ability to communicate with speakers of other languages
- increased self-confidence
- broader horizons
- enhanced career prospects
- increased opportunities for employment and travel

4.4 The Australian school curriculum is also currently under review and the draft proposals emerging from the Australian review include the following statement which serves to sum up our own viewpoint:

Language [learning] affords an important opportunity to... work productively towards strengthening this country's role and relationships globally... Just as importantly... language [learning] contributes to the general education of all students. It operates from the fundamental principle that for all students, learning to communicate in two or more languages is a rich, challenging experience of engaging with the linguistic and cultural diversity of our interconnected world.

(Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages, ACARA, January 2011)

5. Why we need more young people with language skills

5.1 There are powerful arguments for developing the language skills of the next generation. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world a good national capability in languages will serve the interests of the economy, of international relations, of trade, of cultural exchange and of national security.

5.2 We lose out as a trading nation due to our poor language skills; fewer and fewer young people are learning German, for example, yet it is the language of one of our major trading partners. In international affairs we often rely on the English language skills of others rather than being able to communicate directly and more effectively ourselves.

5.3 In the global economy our young people compete for work with their peers from across the world, many of whom speak English and often one or more other major languages. Our monolingual school and university leavers do not find themselves on a level playing field. Education should ensure that students who leave our schools are equipped to do well in the modern world, which must include the basics of foreign language education skills. As stated previously, no-one can predict which language or languages an individual may need to speak in the future, but a solid foundation in any language can help in the acquisition of another.

5.4 Language learning has a part to play in community coherence: a better understanding of 'otherness' and of different communities within our own society. It leads to an appreciation of cultural diversity and thus to more tolerance.

5.5 Far from being a monolingual nation, England is strikingly plurilingual. Hundreds of languages are spoken in England, with London alone having over 300 in everyday use. Yet this rich heritage of many of our young citizens goes largely untapped and is not developed

to its full potential. Schools in many cities enter considerable numbers of pupils for GCSE and other examinations in heritage languages but the formal teaching of these languages is still unusual, despite research evidence that both the general educational development and progress in English improves when children are taught their heritage or first language in school.

6. The E-Bac: an opportunity

6.1 The E-Bac should provide the opportunity for a revival of language learning at KS4.

6.2 It will only do so, however, if the right conditions exist. Our experience as subject specialists tells us successful languages education can only occur if:

- the value of languages is recognised by schools and by society more generally
- well qualified and experienced language teachers are available, supported by access to good professional development
- adequate time is set aside: language learning requires regularity and continuity over a significant period if it is to be successful
- there is guidance and support on the curriculum and assessment

6.3 If more pupils from all backgrounds and across ability ranges are to be engaged by languages and to do well in them, GCSE languages examinations will need to be reviewed to ensure that there is appropriate and stimulating content. There is a real opportunity now to innovate, to raise expectations, and to fire the imagination of teenagers within the framework of the GCSE examination. This may fall outside of the direct remit of the curriculum review but will be a pre-requisite to the successful implementation of the E-Bac.

6.4 A growing number of schools have introduced elements of content and language integrated learning (often known as CLIL) into their teaching. This has proved very successful, placing language acquisition into the real contexts of a range of subject teaching. For example, content from history, geography or science is taught through the medium of the foreign language. Impressive results have been noted in many of the schools using this approach, pupils' development in the languages has accelerated with no negative impact in pupil achievement in the content subject studied. Opportunities to continue with such approaches and support to develop them further could contribute to raising achievement in GCSE languages. There may also be a clear role for CLIL in the development of appropriately rigorous vocational qualifications.

6.5 In response to the decline in participation, many schools and many teachers of languages have successfully introduced alternative qualifications for languages in recent years. They are popular with pupils and teachers alike because they are perceived to be relevant and worthwhile. One examination in particular, the NVQ in business languages, stands out in this respect. Unlike some other NVQs, this examination has significant academic content and is a challenging course which equips students with many useful skills. Teachers using it feel strongly about its value, and it is estimated that around 20% of state schools currently offer the NVQ in languages. There is a danger that the introduction of the E-Bac will endanger these successful alternative qualifications.

7. Languages in the E-Bac

7.1 We believe that there is a strong case for the inclusion of languages in the E-Bac. It would:

- encourage a greater number of young people to study a language GCSE level and thus to complete the 'compulsory years' of schooling with a broadly based education

- complement the other subjects in the suggested range and contribute to a balanced and outward-looking curriculum
- help students access higher education - some universities (e.g. University College London) are already asking for a GCSE or equivalent in a language, or commitment to starting a language course, as an entry requirement; some high achieving state schools are also adopting a similar approach for entry to their sixth forms
- help strengthen the position of languages in primary schools and at KS3.