Education: Languages

Question for Short Debate

28 Oct 2010 **4.30 pm**

Asked By ***Baroness Coussins***

To ask Her Majesty's Government what importance they attach to the teaching of modern languages in schools and universities.

Baroness Coussins: My Lords, modern languages finally hit the headlines this summer. The tipping point was reached when French disappeared from the top 10 GCSE subjects for the first time ever; A-level entries dropped; university departments began to anticipate the cuts by planning reductions in modern language courses; and, to cap it all, schools and local authorities realised that, despite years of investment, languages were no longer to be made compulsory in primary schools. The bleak picture was compounded by the publication last month of an OECD survey that showed that secondary school pupils in the UK spend less time studying languages than their counterparts anywhere else in the developed world. Only 7 per cent of the lesson time of 12 to 14 year-olds is allocated to languages, which is half the amount that they spend on sciences. This puts England joint bottom of a table of 39 countries, alongside Ireland and Estonia and behind Indonesia and Mexico.

This provoked a flurry of articles and comments on why it is important that we get better at languages. Having one or more languages in addition to English is a huge asset to anyone competing in a global labour market at whatever level. Your Lordships' House has debated before the serious disadvantage to UK business and competitiveness of the lack of language skills in the workforce, and I shall not repeat that argument today. In addition to the business case, knowledge of other people's languages opens doors to understanding other people's cultures; and competence in languages provides us with the wherewithal to function in international institutions and to participate in research. The UK's capacity in all these areas is now dangerously low, and we will suffer serious commercial and cultural damage unless we inject a new urgency and commitment into our national approach to learning languages.

The forthcoming review of the national curriculum, and the conclusion of the noble Lord, Lord Browne, in his recent review of university funding, that languages should be a priority subject for public investment, suggest that the timing is right for nothing less than a national languages recovery programme-and I ask the Minister to acknowledge that putting it in such bold terms is absolutely warranted. I also thank the Minister for stepping in at such short notice to reply to this debate, and ask her to convey all our good wishes to the noble Lord, Lord Hill. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, which I chair, will be making recommendations to the curriculum review. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell the House when this will be announced and what the timetable for consultation will be.

Today, I will simply flag up some of the issues around languages that I believe must form part of the review. First, we must begin to put right the disastrous consequences of the policy to make languages optional at key stage 4. The decline in GCSE entries from 2004 has been severe. The vast majority of state schools neither insist on a language post-14 nor even set a benchmark for take-up, as they are meant to do. As a result, languages have become one of the main causes of what the coalition Government have called the "vast gulf" between state and independent schools, with pupil take-up at key stage 4 being only 41 per cent from comprehensives, compared to 81 per cent from independent schools and 91 per cent across all selective schools.

I do not believe that it would be right to force every child to take a language GCSE, but I do believe very strongly that it should be compulsory for every child to study at least one modern foreign language until they are 16, at a level appropriate to them. Fortunately, the Government do not need to reinvent the wheel to apply this model, because the Languages Ladder provides exactly that flexibility. It is a national recognition scheme to reward achievement at all levels, from beginners through to advanced and proficient language learners, and it is calibrated against the Common European Framework of Reference. Will the Minister undertake to look at this as a way of restoring compulsory language teaching up to the age of 16? I noticed recently that one of the major teacher unions, the NASUWT, has come out strongly in favour of compulsory language teaching at key stage 4, and some forward-looking schools are beginning to restrict access to the sixth form to those with a language GCSE.

Given the complete failure of the benchmarking strategy to increase take-up, but also given this Government's stated desire to loosen central control over schools, I ask the Minister how the Government plan to make schools accountable for improving take-up and attainment in languages.

What about primary schools? We had 92 per cent of primary schools teaching languages in mainstream curriculum time, in anticipation of a statutory framework from 2011, only to discover that the pre-general election wash-up process had resulted in this long-standing commitment being abandoned. The risk now is that, without a statutory requirement, some schools and some LEAs will drop languages again. Certainly I believe that if compulsory language teaching up to the age of 16 is not reinstated, many other primary schools will surely not think it worth investing in language teaching for their seven year-olds, only to send them to secondary school aged 11 where their achievement may not be valued or built on. A survey only last month showed that 75 per cent of local authorities positively want languages to be made compulsory in primary schools, so will the Minister agree that the Government should revert to plan A and do just that?

My final point on schools, before I move on to universities, is to urge the Government to get the people who create the exam syllabuses to be more imaginative. If all that children do for GCSE is more of what they have done between the ages of 11 and 14, and that centres on endless descriptions of what they did over the weekend or describing their family members to an imaginary penfriend, no wonder they are too bored to carry on with it. Research from Australia and Scotland shows that children value and want to do subjects that are seen as serious, even if they find them hard. Too often, the relevance of languages is pitched to

children in terms of sport, fashion or going on holiday, but in my view the appeal that would hit home more effectively, as well as being more grounded educationally, would be the relevance and workings of grammar and the whole structure of language, including English, to the child's capacity for self-expression, intellectual challenge and understanding in the context of a world where it will be a serious disadvantage to be monolingual, even if your one language is English.

Some universities, like some schools, are beginning to acknowledge the importance of languages in their admissions policies by introducing a language requirement for all applicants, irrespective of degree subject. This is certainly a welcome step for the universities concerned but it is also significant for schools, which will need to take those universities' requirements into account when structuring their timetables and advising their pupils on GCSE option choices.

Alongside this, it is very disappointing to see that other universities are looking at cutting modern language provision. Swansea, for example, is considering proposals which would apparently involve 22 academic staff competing for eight posts in a reduced department and the disappearance of Italian, Russian and Portuguese altogether. This is despite the Welsh Assembly declaring earlier this year that the study of modern languages was a "national strategic priority". I hope that Swansea and any other university contemplating cutbacks in their languages provision will take a closer look at the Worton report and resist such short-sighted and damaging cuts in languages. The UK needs to produce more specialist linguists to be teachers, translators and interpreters, but we also need more scientists, economists, lawyers and others who can work in English and in another language. That is important for their employment prospects as individuals and for the capacity of UK universities to compete globally.

I should like to ask the Minister what specific action the Government intend to take to reinforce the status of modern languages as "strategically important and vulnerable" subjects at university level. The forum set up after the Worton review is one important contribution which I hope will be continued.

The STEM subjects have rightly attracted attention and strategic investment. Modern languages require the same declaration of priority and leadership from Government to give universities the confidence and incentive to build on their provision, not to diminish it. Professor Worton, in an article in last week's *TimesHigher Education* supplement, said:

"The case for modern languages in universities has never been more compelling".

He asks whether universities have the courage to deliver. I ask the Minister whether the Government will have the courage to do likewise.

Baroness Hooper: My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, for raising this question and congratulate her on introducing the debate so brilliantly. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that the Government attach considerable importance to the teaching of modern languages in schools and universities. It is an area which is much in need of encouragement and support.

The arguments about the value and usefulness of speaking another language have been well made by the noble Baroness, who in her short time in the House of Lords has established herself as a true advocate of this cause. From my experience, I feel that there are two main arguments. First, an ability to think and speak in another language enables us to understand the culture, history and approach of the people speaking that language. That can be very useful in difficult, delicate negotiations and even for a simple transaction such as buying a gift in a market as a tourist. The second is that in learning another language I believe that you understand your own better. That is especially true of English, which is such an unstructured language. A few good rules of grammar learned from French, Spanish or German-in the absence of Latin these days-can greatly improve the quality of English spoken.

That being said, we are today seeking to find out from this new Government what plans they have to increase and improve the teaching and learning of other languages in the aftermath of the statements earlier this year referred to by the noble Baroness. English is the most spoken language in the world, both as a first and a second language. After English comes Spanish as a first language. I happen to speak it as well as French and German, which I learned at school, and I have found them all useful in both my legal and my political careers.

Last week, President Piñera of Chile addressed parliamentarians here and said that his Government's intention was to make Chile a bilingual country in Spanish and English. That was in the context of organising more educational exchanges and links between our two countries, particularly at university level. In the short time available, I wish to emphasise that and I hope that the Government will bear it in mind when the consequences of the necessary budgetary cuts impact on things such as Chevening Fellowships, the British Council's education programme and other educational language initiatives. It is vital not only that our students should be able to go abroad to further their studies, but also that young people from other countries should be able to come here and be welcomed and nurtured when they get here. Anything that the Government can do to improve the struggles with, for example, the current visa requirements and restrictions, as well as to increase and focus funding, would be most welcome.

Finally, I urge a change of attitude. This issue has already been addressed by the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins. We need a change of attitude to the learning of languages, especially among schoolchildren. Just because English is the most spoken language in the world does not mean that our children are more stupid than Dutch or Scandinavian children, who all seem able to grow up speaking three or four languages well and study the other conventional subjects.

If children can learn the language of computers so easily-something that I have to struggle with-learning another spoken language should be a doddle. That message should be put across to them. Any support that teachers can be given should be encouraged and built on. I mean in this context not only admission policies. Perhaps an increase in the number of competitions and prizes, such as the Canning House essay competition for sixth-formers in Spanish and Portuguese, should be encouraged to underline how important the speaking of languages is.

Lord Harrison: My Lords, this week we have been celebrating the life and work of Baroness Daphne Park, herself a doughty defender of the United Kingdom but also a brilliant linguist. She told me once, knowing of my son's interest as a Russianist, that when she was a raw recruit in Moscow she had said to an old Muscovite, "I like to have a good swim every morning before going to work". Unfortunately, the verbs "to swim" and "to spit" are cognate and what she actually said to the recoiling Muscovite was, "I like to have a good spit every morning before going to work"-a matter of great expectoration, as I said to her.

In speaking in today's debate, I should like to thank another doughty fighter for modern languages, the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, who has single-handedly led our modern languages group and has highlighted the lamentable and deteriorating levels of language learning and acquisition in this country. However, I will concentrate on Baroness Park's concerns with the defence of this country. There is an important role to help the British Armed Forces to accomplish their task, as the UK military operates throughout the world, either as UN peacekeepers or in assisting in disaster zones.

Two factors make language skills very much sought after. First, there is the fight against terrorism-monitoring and interpreting information coming to us-but there is also the winning of hearts and minds in conflict zones. It is not sufficient just to have a passing knowledge of Afghan Pashto or Dari; we need to speak them fluently and sympathetically enough to win hearts and minds. The armed services dedicated training centre, the Defence School of Languages at Beaconsfield, is important. Have languages featured in the recent defence review? Has the defence school been affected by departmental cuts? What is its capacity? Does it need expansion? What are the recruitment patterns? I point out that 70 per cent of linguists coming out of university are women, whereas men predominate in the armed services. Does that cause a problem? Will the Minister think about the Territorial Army, which I should have thought was good ground for increasing language knowledge within the Army?

The head of language engagement at GCHQ, the Bletchley Park of language code breaking, said recently that GCHQ is obviously affected by the parlous trend of the take-up of language learning in the United Kingdom. Indeed, so challenged has it been that it is now going out to schools and universities to encourage recruitment. I am not sure that it should be doing that, but there we are; it has to because we need those young people. How does GCHQ work? Typically, most recruits come with French and other European languages. Then at GCHQ they are taught languages that are needed for intelligence-typically, the languages of the Middle East, the Near and Far East and Africa. We are told that languages are not taught as they are in typical language classes:

"In the Albanian ab initio training course, we effectively train linguists to speak Albanian badly".

We need more linguists to speak badly, if badly means that that they understand the stream of consciousness language-sometimes grammatically illiterate-which they then have to interpret and from which they need to draw the intelligence that is so badly needed for the defence of this country. Will the Minister say whether the prohibition on non-Brits working at GCHQ could be lifted if they were properly vetted?

As to the scandalous racism, which leads to the fact that the top 60 senior civil servants at GCHQ are all white, we need to tap into those black and ethnic British who want to defend our country. We should do so because they have the first-hand knowledge of languages that we badly need in defence and security.

Baroness Sharp of Guildford: My Lords, I join others in thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, for bringing this debate. As the noble Lord, Lord Harrison, said, she is a doughty champion for modern foreign languages. I wish her well in her campaign. As the noble Baroness said when she introduced this debate, the rot really set in in 2004, when we reluctantly as a House agreed to allow the noble Baroness, Lady Ashton, to drop the requirement from the national curriculum for a modern foreign language to be compulsory in key stage 4. That deal with the noble Baroness was in return for languages being made compulsory in primary schools. The rolling out of the primary school programme for teaching modern foreign languages was introduced at that time. I have to say that I am extremely distressed that this has now been dropped.

The agreement followed on from a report by the Nuffield Foundation. Looking at why Britain was so bad at languages, it came up with the answer that, in countries such as the Scandinavian countries and Holland, English was taught from a very early age. It was taught in primary schools. Thus, children were already somewhat fluent when they arrived at secondary school, where it was reinforced by further study. The report suggested that children learnt languages better at the ages of seven, eight and nine than they did later and that, therefore, it would be a good idea to teach languages in primary schools.

The other idea was that languages should be taught like music. If you were good at languages you could attain grade 8; if you were less good you could do grades 1, 2 or 3, or something like that, and stop at that point. That notion-the Language Ladder was referred to by the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins-has translated the teaching of modern foreign languages into precisely the music grade system, which is to be welcomed. It provides a good foundation from which young children learning languages at primary school can develop their language skills. It is doubly unfortunate that we now propose to drop the programme of teaching languages in primary schools.

I certainly remember having tea with the noble Baroness, Lady Ashton, and talking to her at some length about the idea that, while we did not have people trained in modern foreign languages with degrees to teach them in the schools, we nevertheless had a great many native speakers. If we presume to send people abroad to teach English as a foreign language after six weeks' intensive training, there is no reason why many native speakers in this country could not be trained as teaching assistants to teach, particularly in our primary schools, to the level required.

One of the unfortunate things about the primary school programme is that, while teaching modern languages was great fun, it was often for little more than half an hour a week because of the requirements of the national curriculum and the lack of time in those schools. It requires not half an hour a week but half an hour every day with a language assistant, which helps someone to become fluent.

I entirely agree with the points made by the noble Baroness, Lady Hooper. Learning a language helps you to understand your own and to use your own language. It is a very important skill. I am very sorry to see it being dropped and I hope that my noble friend the Minister will assure us that the Government will give it high priority and that we shall be reinforcing these programmes.

Lord Broers: I, too, thank the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, for bringing our attention back to this vital subject. I am speaking today because I believe that knowledge of more than one language enhances one's breadth of outlook and intellectual acuity, especially for those trained narrowly as scientists and engineers. It is not only the obvious practical benefits of being able to work with and to operate in other countries that are of great importance, but the effect that it has on one's intellectual capability.

I wish to share with the House what I learnt following a BBC World Service programme a couple of weeks ago. Some noble Lords may have heard the programme or know about the work described, which is relevant to this debate. Professor Jared Diamond of UCLA was talking about the work of Professor Ellen Bialystok of York University, Toronto, who has shown that bilingualism gives children a distinct cognitive advantage over their monolingual peers. She has found that bilingual children outperform monolingual children on tasks involving executive control. These comprise the cognitive processes that allow for abstract thinking, planning and initiating and inhibiting actions. Three separate experiments on six year-old students demonstrated that children who routinely spoke more than one language could better focus on pertinent information and suppress their attention to a distracting or irrelevant item. Her surprising finding was that bilingual children performed better than monolingual children not only on the difficult condition that involved alternating between letters and numbers but also on the simple condition in which they just connected consecutive numbers.

Stimulated by her results with children, Professor Bialystok joined Dr Fergus Craik, a neuropsychologist at the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care in Toronto, to go to the other end of the age scale and see whether similar effects were present in healthy adults. They looked at the records of 184 patients diagnosed with dementia, about half of whom were fluently bilingual, speaking two or more languages daily. It turned out that the onset of dementia was an average of 4.1 years later for the bilingual patients than for those with only one language. The theory is that bilingual people are constantly having to use their attentional control system, thereby increasing its capacity, which appears now to help to resist the effects of dementia and Alzheimer's.

Those findings fitted with evidence from post-mortem studies, which have shown that about a third of people with the physical symptoms of Alzheimer's, such as amyloid plaques, had no cognitive impairment before they died, meaning that their brains somehow fought off the disease. Perhaps there is hope for us monolinguists yet, but we will have to become fluent in another language. The Toronto scientists did not find these effects in those with a knowledge of a language but who were not fluently bilingual.

All this reinforces what I have long believed and what led me to work with Ann Dowling and Sarah Springman in the Cambridge University engineering department to set up the

language programme for engineers, about which I spoke in the debate on this subject-also called by the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins-last December. I am pleased to report that this programme remains popular, with almost 800 students participating this year. However, it would be even stronger if more students had studied languages in school.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: My Lords, it is welcome that my noble friend has secured today's short debate on the teaching of modern languages in schools and universities. For some years now the general weakening in Britain's performance in this area of education has been alarming and it has shown no signs yet of being reversed. We all owe a debt of gratitude to my noble friend for her untiring work as chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, and the number of speakers in the debate shows just how wide is the unease about recent trends. I hope that the Government will take careful note of that and will act more effectively to address the underlying problems.

Government policy in recent years, while paying lip service to the existence of a problem, has done little about it. The welcome acceptance of the recommendation of the much missed Lord Dearing, that modern languages should become part of the primary school curriculum, which is now fading away, was matched-undermined, you might say-by enabling it to be dropped from the secondary school syllabus. Now, with the Browne report on higher education finance, the Government are being urged to include what are quaintly called strategic modern languages among the group of subjects on which the much truncated teaching grant to universities should be concentrated in future. Do the Government intend to accept that recommendation and what do they understand to be strategic modern languages?

The case for reversing Britain's increasingly poor performance in learning modern languages can be argued at many levels. I shall focus for the moment on the utilitarian. The Government are quite rightly determined to improve Britain's performance as an exporter. They want Britain's diplomats to concentrate more on that part of their job. It is not a particularly original idea; it has been tried several times in the past. But contracts are won and retained not by diplomats but by businessmen. If fewer and fewer of our businessmen are competent linguists, there will be fewer and fewer export successes. The expansion of our intelligence services is a national priority in the battle against terrorism, but where will competent linguists be found for the intelligence services? A Britain whose relative weight in an increasingly interdependent world is dropping will need to co-operate and build alliances more than in the past. Do we believe that simply expecting everyone to speak our own language and to work in our language will facilitate that?

If one looks out beyond the purely utilitarian arguments, it is surely sobering to think of how we narrow our understanding and perception of other cultures and literatures if we have no knowledge of their languages. How are our world-class universities to retain and improve their standing and reputation for academic excellence if their capacity to study, research in and teach modern languages is continually declining? I hope that the Government will now take a deep breath and look again at the whole range of issues that influence the role of modern languages in our education system. Needed are not just warm words but effective action to reverse the present downward trend.

I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench. She is a loss to our sub-committee in the EU Select Committee system, but she is a great gain to the House.

Baroness Butler-Sloss: My Lords, I am delighted that this important debate is taking place and I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, on introducing it. I share everybody else's concern about the loss of languages in schools and universities, but I am concerned also by the failure of the general public to take an interest in languages or to see any need to be concerned. I suspect that they generally think that English is universal and see no reason to worry about anything else. This is unacceptable complacency, when we need to remember that we live in a global community. On a visit to China, I was embarrassed to find that all the delightful young women who were looking after the group that I was with spoke impeccable English, yet none of them had ever left China. It really is an embarrassment.

I recently went to Bordeaux. That was not an embarrassment, nor was the reason that I went. It was for a wine-tasting with a small group of people and it was a delightful visit. However, two men in our small group could not even read the notices in French, but they were the leading experts in wine and regularly visited Bordeaux. They were actually rather proud of the fact that they did not speak French. I am glad to say that the women in our party were much better at French than the men, which is not all that unusual.

Our young people must be encouraged to take an interest in languages and the way of life of other countries, which follows from learning their language. It is a crucial part of the general education of young people. What will the Government do, or what do they think they might be able to do, to change a wide culture or, rather, lack of culture towards foreign languages and the way of life of other countries?

Lord Cobbold: My Lords, I am pleased to have the opportunity to support the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, in her Question to Her Majesty's Government. The teaching of modern languages to the young is a matter of great importance. We must not allow ourselves to take the line that, because English has become the leading global language, there is no need for us to learn another.

While the importance of English is a huge advantage, it has its problems. In a recent European Commission survey of Europeans' non-mother-tongue skills, Britain came last out of 28 countries. Languages are crucial to our success in the European, Asia/Pacific and Latin American markets. It is said that only one-third of UK university graduates are confident enough to go and work abroad compared with two-thirds in other European countries, so we are not gaining international expertise that could enrich the UK skills base.

Many international companies look for language skills when recruiting and those with language skills tend to get the most interesting and best-paid jobs. Skill in languages is something that children of a very young age can develop and it is therefore good that language teaching is encouraged in primary schools. But it seems very unwise that it should not also be encouraged in secondary schools, thus providing continuity between primary school and university. I hope that the Government will rectify that admission.

The question then is, which languages should be taught? At the European level, French, German and Spanish are the leaders but, given increasing globalisation, and particularly the rise of China, increasing attention should be given to the study of Mandarin and other Asian languages.

There is one issue on which I have some doubts and that is whether it is good policy to include the study of Latin in the curriculum. There is no doubt that the study of Latin is a good introduction to grammar, the structure of several European languages and a wealth of classical history and art, but I remember from my own experience many years ago wishing that the time spent learning Latin could have been better spent on a modern language. Indeed, we used to say: "Latin is a language, as dead as dead can be. It killed the ancient Romans and now it's killing me". That is a trivial matter of personal experience long ago and in no way detracts from the importance of modern language teaching in our schools today. I hope that the Government will acknowledge this importance and, in particular, move to make the teaching of modern languages obligatory at secondary school level.

Lord Lyell: My Lords, what a pleasure it is to be able to thank the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, once again for introducing this timely debate. As we have heard and will hear a lot more, it is an important debate,

I hope that I have not bored your Lordships, let alone the noble Baroness, in the past, with my desperate inability to grasp the baser elements of science. That was until I came to your Lordships' House. My school years up to 1956 were enlivened by learning languages. Indeed, one of the prime elements in my language lessons was the housemaster or tutor of the noble Lord, Lord Cobbold, who has just sat down. I remember in 1954, he put me through the elements of German, the classics of Greek and Latin and slotted me in perfectly.

The years to 1956 were enlivened by what I call the "dog jumping through the hoop" syndrome. In other words, you learnt verbs one to 33 in French. You learnt about pleonastic "ne" and what Rochefoucauld meant to say or not-I apologise to the noble Lord, Lord Jay. When you finished the exams, you felt rather like the galley slave once again brought to shore; you felt safe.

I have had the enormous good fortune to spend over 40 years in your Lordships' House, and I have taken language courses, sometimes here in your Lordships' House and sometimes at a professional language school. Indeed, quite often there have been repetitive lessons from a book, but they have enabled me to take the first step in some European countries.

My mindset after leaving school was one of pure pleasure in that I discovered a world-famous daily sporting paper, *L'Equipe*, of which I have a copy here today. I hope that my noble friend on the Front Bench will not tut too much; I shall not read from it, as one should not produce newspapers. But for many young schoolboys and perhaps young schoolgirls, and indeed in primary school, this may be the first step to enliven what is a set language-not just to learn like dogs jumping through hoops, but to learn terms for football, tennis or other activities in other languages. So far I have tried these particular disciplines in German and Italian, while Spanish, Portuguese and oriental languages were spared my young efforts. I had the time when I was in the Northern Ireland Office to go to huge food fairs, mainly in

Europe-Cologne, Berlin, Paris and a very instructive morning in Lille. These were exhibitions and trade fairs connected with agriculture and food, my main responsibility in Northern Ireland. On every occasion I had the good luck to meet Ministers and senior officials, and my languages seemed to put me and the Northern Ireland Office in their good books. It taught me the real value of top-class, professional language training.

We have heard and will hear more that English is very much the language used all over the world, but I make a plea to my noble friend to give the very highest award to targeted professional language training directed towards business. Earlier this month, I attended a special function at our leading Scottish business school at Heriot-Watt University, and the great plea I heard there was to target professional language training to the particular aspects of business and overseas trade. Indeed, much of that trade and the disciplines are in English, but if you can make one or two efforts in the language of your host, you will gain that extra yard and gain success-not only for your firm but, above all, for business.

I am not entirely aware of the systems of language laboratories, because I am too old to have experienced that. Learning languages was done with the aid of a book, newspapers and, as American footballers say, grinding out the yardage of proper grammar. I make a plea to the Minister to see whether she has any good news about laboratories with personal headphones. It may be a question of cost, but it would cost a good bit less than some of the traditional means we have heard about.

I conclude by thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, for introducing this debate and hearing me once again on my pet subject.

5.12 pm

Baroness Sherlock: I add my voice to congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, and pay tribute to her expertise and determination in this area. I do not share her expertise, but I was inspired to contribute to this debate by a visit to a school. I have the good fortune to live in the city of Durham, but I have discovered recently that only 38 per cent of students in our authority study a modern foreign language up to GCSE or equivalent. That is despite the fact that we have three large schools in the authority that are specialist language schools; indeed, without those three schools, it would be only 30 per cent. Last month I visited one of those three, Durham Johnston Comprehensive School, and I was hugely impressed with the staff and the students. It is a good school but, in particular, they showed what can be done if the leadership of a school sets out to tackle the problem described in this debate and tries to persuade parents as well as students of the wider value of language learning. A school that does that is up against some fairly serious odds, as it is hard to persuade students and parents of the value of language when we do not appear to value it as a society. Schools risk falling down the league tables when they choose to promote languages over other subjects perceived to be easier academically. That is a risk for a school to take. That price becomes ever higher as the base of those taking languages at GCSE becomes narrower.

Some schools are struggling to recruit experienced language teachers, and there is a noticeable gender issue, with languages being seen to be for girls-which the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Butler-Sloss, has clearly discovered is not just for those still in school.

Recently the head of languages in a large specialist language school told me that for the past six years he has been the only male teacher in the language department in that school. He also mentioned a school in Newcastle where, because it was a boys' school,

28 Oct 2010 : Column 1405

more boys are doing A-level languages than in the whole of the rest of the north-east. Will the Minister consider this in her closing remarks?

So what else can be done? I share the comments of noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, and another colleague about the importance of the statutory framework for primary school teaching. Will the Minister say how, during the curriculum review, she might ensure that that work carries on, so that the momentum is not lost? My understanding is that the funding that goes to training those local authority advisers-the people who actually train non-specialist primary teachers to use their language skills to introduce a language-will run out in March. Can she confirm that and, if so, tell me how she might maintain that momentum while the curriculum review is taking place?

Secondly, I should like the state to find a way of supporting schools such as Durham Johnston which are trying to promote languages, by incentivising or rewarding them in some way. It should remove any disincentives in league table terms. We certainly do not want to put schools off when they are enthusiastic about languages. As other noble Lords have mentioned, GCSE examinations could do with some serious overhaul. The current, rather binary pass/fail outcome does little to encourage students to take those exams and does not recognise the range of achievements that they may have. Students may be good at speaking or reading, or reach different levels. That is something which examinations could usefully recognise and it would encourage more students to proceed.

I endorse the calls of other noble Lords for action to support language teaching in higher education. In particular, I support the call of the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, asking the Minister to urge her colleagues to make sure that they directly engage with the forum led by CILT, the National Centre for Languages, set up in the wake of the Worton review. Will she look at the lead set by UCL, which now requires undergraduate entrants either to have a good GCSE in a modern language or to consider studying one when they arrive?

Languages are at risk of becoming elite subjects. Pupils at independent and grammar schools study them, many top universities teach them, but fewer other institutions do so comprehensively. I should like everyone to have that chance. I am a bad example. I studied French and German to O-level and, I confess to the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, that I use them almost never. I do so occasionally on holiday and in restaurants, but I very much want future generations to have the chances that I had, and I feel confident that they would make rather better use of them than I did.

5.17 pm

Baroness Benjamin: My Lords, I was going to speak in French today but was told that that may be a faux pas. So I said to myself, "C'est la vie". However, I am very glad to be speaking in this debate and thank the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, for initiating it because the

subject affects children's long-term ability to communicate effectively when they go out into the big wide world. I am interested in their personal intellectual development, commercial advantages, social cohesion through the reduction of xenophobia and their awareness

of other cultures. A wonderfully exciting way to achieve this is through the learning of languages. The ability to understand and communicate in another language is a lifelong skill for education, employment and leisure, and provides a sense of global citizenship and personal fulfilment, as we have heard.

I always find it intriguing how foreign politicians, business leaders, football mangers, and sportsmen and women whose first language is not English are able to answer questions and make statements in a language other than their own-and we expect them to do so. I wonder how many of us could show that same linguistic dexterity. Or would we just, in the good old British tradition, shout louder in the hope of being understood.

We should be encouraging, improving and increasing the teaching of modern languages in schools as early as possible-from primary education right through to university. Yet this year, for the first time, French, one of the most commonly taught languages in schools, slipped out of the top 10 most popular GCSE subjects. Sadly, less than one in four pupils now sits the French exam. This year's GCSE take-up figures showed the number of pupils taking French and German had virtually halved since 2002. This is a very worrying trend, and at a teachers' conference in London recently, teachers voted by 73 per cent to make languages compulsory again at GCSE level to help promote global understanding.

It seems to me that anyone with common sense can see that children who do not have the chance to learn a language will be at a disadvantage and will not be given the opportunity to experience the feelings of achievement and self esteem which come from being able to communicate in another language. For primary school children, learning a new foreign language, such as French, as part of the curriculum enhances their understanding of how languages work and of the similarities and differences between them. It can also be taught using a cross-curriculum approach. It gives children for whom English is a second language the feeling of inclusion and achievement as they are learning a new language on a level playing field. It is always wonderful to see how receptive and enthusiastic young children are when they are learning a new language using stories, games, songs, drama and speech with great enjoyment. At the age of seven, children are noticeably adept at imitating the correct pronunciation. I still remember learning my first French phrase, "Ouvrez la fenêtre", meaning, "Open the window".

However, the window of opportunity to learn the basics of language learning may be lost for some children by the time they reach the age of 11 because by then children are more set in their ways, so we need good teachers from the very beginning in those early foundation years. Teaching languages at universities is vital to this because those university students will go on to teach modern languages in our schools. At the University of Exeter, where I am chancellor, so I declare an interest, I am pleased to say that we have a postgraduate certificate in modern foreign languages programme. Many of our students go on to become

heads of language departments in UK schools. We also have a primary postgraduate certificate programme that prepares about 25 students each year as language specialists in primary schools. The courses enable students to explore the exciting challenges that face teachers and learners of modern foreign languages in Britain today. It is vital that we feed students through to universities eventually to become teachers themselves.

If we are to send our children out into a global competitive world, they need to be well equipped and not to feel inadequate or to be at a disadvantage when it comes to communicating and succeeding. However, as we have heard, there are sadly still too few primary school teachers who are qualified to teach modern foreign languages to our children and start them off on that wonderful journey of exploration. So will the Minister say in winding up what the Government are doing to encourage the teaching of modern foreign languages in our primary schools today?

Lord Jay of Ewelme: My Lords, I, too, am very grateful to my noble friend Lady Coussins for introducing this debate. I begin by declaring an interest as chairman of the NGO Culham Languages and Sciences, which I set up to bring into the state system as an academy the European School at Culham near Oxford. I shall not go into detail, but it is a school of some 900 children between the ages of five and 18 and is the only school in the country that teaches the European Baccalaureate, which is not the same as the International Baccalaureate. That means that 18 year-old school leavers are fluent speakers of at least three languages, and when I say "fluent", I mean fluent. To sit around a table with half a dozen 17 and 18 year-olds who can speak two, three or four languages and see the prospects that are open to them is quite daunting and, to be honest, rather humbling.

When the school becomes an academy, as I hope it will, I hope that it will be able to work with other schools in the neighbourhood and, through distance learning, with schools outside the neighbourhood in order to encourage language teaching more widely. I am extremely grateful for the support I have had from the previous Government and, in particular, from the noble Lord, Lord Adonis, and from this Government, particularly the noble Lord, Lord Hill, on this project.

As other noble Lords have said, Britain is international. Internationalism is multilingual, and if Britain is monolingual, it will simply lose out. It is as simple as that. If a firm in the City today has a choice between the most brilliant monolingual English graduate and an equally brilliant French, German or Dutch graduate who speaks three or four languages fluently, including, of course, English, it does not require thought to know which one it will choose. Those of us who live in London, at least from time to time, and hear foreign languages spoken will know how much that is already happening. To become bilingual or trilingual by the time you leave university or indeed school, however, it is hugely important to start young. It is nothing like as effective to start learning French or German at the age of 11, 12 or 13 as it is at four or five. Like my noble friend Lord Cobbold, having spent two hours a day learning Latin from the age of eight to 15, then having had to bring my French up to scratch at six in the morning in order to present to the French authorities the "hard ecu" proposal of the noble Lord, Lord Lawson, I know what that means-it really makes a difference to start young. I strongly hope that the Government will give a high priority to language teaching in our public sector schools.

Many of our private schools have got the message and are acting on it. Mandarin is increasingly taught, and rightly so. As the noble Baroness, Lady Sherlock, said, though, enlightened head teachers in the public sector are increasingly seeing there too how crucial it is to give priority to languages. However, they need the Government's help-they need a push to do that. The noble Lord, Lord Hill, speaking in a debate earlier today, spoke of a new English baccalaureate that might include an ancient or a modern language. I urge the Government that there should be one compulsory modern language in this new qualification; let the ancient language be the voluntary one.

Modern language teaching and learning is not a luxury. It is essential to bring out the best in our young to equip them for life in the 21st century, and it is essential for Britain's competitiveness in a hugely competitive age.

Baroness Warnock: My Lords, as the last Back-Bench speaker in this debate I have absolutely nothing new to say that has not been said before. This has been an important debate, and I am grateful to my noble friend Lady Coussins for introducing it and for her tireless work in supporting, and doing everything to rescue, the teaching of modern languages in schools.

It is a matter of rescue because the teaching of modern languages in the maintained sector is in a terrible condition, as the figures that we have heard show. I hope that the move towards academies, to which my noble friend Lord Jay of Ewelme, has just referred, will enable enthusiastic heads not only to encourage pupils to learn modern languages but actually to insist on it, as well as, if they can, to employ Europeans to teach European languages. That is an important part of what we could do to encourage not just the learning of languages but the enjoyment of doing so.

In my experience of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, what is wrong with primary school language teaching and, where it exists, secondary school language teaching is not so much the difficulty of getting a good grade at GCSE, of which we have heard we have quite a lot, but the incredible tedium of the way that languages are taught. I can number six grandchildren who have all said to me that what they hate most about school is learning languages. There is something deeply wrong with this, because these children enjoy almost every other subject.

In order to reintroduce compulsory modern foreign languages at up to key stage 4 and possibly GCSE as well-nothing short of that would do-there needs to be a radical rethink of the syllabus for GCSE French and, doubtless, German and Spanish. There are schools that can do it. One of my children teaches at Dulwich College. She reports that the teaching of Spanish there is not only extremely successful but enormously enjoyable. People choose to do it just because it is fun.

Children generally have a great love of language. They love words, learning the derivation of words, comparing ways of saying things in one language and another, and the whole business of translation or the possibility of not being able to translate exactly from one language to another. That fascinates them. Why can we not deploy this natural enthusiasm

for language, with all the purely linguistic interests of learning a modern foreign language, for all the utilitarian reasons as well?

Fundamentally, learning other languages is and can be fun; not in order to be able to go shopping, nor even to supply the nuances of business engagement, but simply because language is our greatest human ability. Not to exploit that seems to me to be madness.

I deplore the move whereby languages were no longer compulsory up to key stage 4. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Sharp, I also have great hopes for the Language Ladder, which was an invention of the late Lord Dearing. In or out of school, having a way of learning language that is analogous to the way of learning music, and examining it in a way that is analogous to the associated board examinations, would be an enormous incentive. Children are pretty ambitious. They like to be able to see where they have got to, and get to the next stage and be better than somebody who is five years' younger than them. They like that kind of thing, and we should exploit that.

I greatly hope that the Minister will be able to offer some encouraging words about the Language Ladder and, more importantly, about encouraging heads and particularly new academies to branch out and find new ways of learning languages by exploiting love of languages in children.

Baroness Crawley: My Lords, I, too, congratulate, the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, not only on securing this vital debate but on her persistence in championing the importance of modern languages. I also welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box this afternoon and send our best wishes to the noble Lord, Lord Hill, from these Benches.

Those of us who fret over the undeniable truth that so few of us speak any foreign language must answer some direct questions. Would our national, economic and commercial prospects be enhanced if more of us spoke French, German, Russian or Mandarin? Would we be in some way a better family of citizens, as the noble Baroness, Lady Benjamin, put it, if English was not our only tongue? Would our young people be somehow differentially smarter, more mentally agile-as the noble Lord, Lord Broers, said-and versatile if they mastered a foreign language rather than some other school or university discipline?

In preparing to answer such questions, one must confront a stark and uncomfortable reality. The technological wonders of the age have had the effect of depressing the motivation of English-speaking people to learn other languages. The internet was born of English-speaking parents. The giant brands of Amazon, eBay and Facebook all started in America, and obviously had English as their first language. The attitude is: so many of us can communicate with others, run our businesses and buy the goods we want without needing to learn any Portuguese future perfect subjunctives or German substantives-why bother? Consider how easy it is online to have the contents of a website translated into English. You do not have to know how to conjugate; you just have to know how to click. There lies the road to complacency and marginalisation when it comes to the take-up of modern languages.

On the other side, the incentives for others in the world to build their own English skills in order to prosper have never been sharper. As the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Butler-

Sloss, pointed out, for millions English is the default second language. Therefore, psychologically and pragmatically, the drive to learn another language is, for us, naturally blunted. Of course, the question is whether leaning a foreign language would make us better people, a richer culture and a stronger society, socially and commercially. The answer has to be an emphatic yes.

I am proud of the investment that my Government made in language teaching and research but I acknowledge that there is still much more to be done, despite the marvellous job undertaken by language teachers and lecturers across our education sector. They are working in a very challenging environment and attitudes need to change. No debate on modern languages should pass without our acknowledgement, as the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, has mentioned, of the work undertaken by our much missed friend and colleague Lord Dearing. I am sure he would, like me and other noble Lords today, have liked to ask the Government what the latest information that they can give us is on taking forward the primary curriculum in languages, given the lack of agreement between the parties immediately before the general election.

I also ask the Minister-she may well answer in writing-about universities and the Chancellor's announcement last week that there was to be a cut in overall funding to the higher education sector of 40 per cent, including an estimated 75 per cent cut in funding for undergraduate teaching. What comfort can the Minister give modern foreign languages departments in universities about their future security? New life needs to be breathed into the teaching of modern foreign languages. We need a recovery programme, as the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, put it, or a task force, as my noble friend Lord Harrison might put it. Are the Government up to the task?

Baroness Garden of Frognal: My Lords, I am delighted to have an opportunity to contribute to this debate, although I very much regret the circumstances that have caused me to stand in for my noble friend the Minister. I shall indeed convey your Lordships' good wishes to him. We hope to see him back in his place very soon. I also thank the noble Baroness for securing this debate. I pay tribute to all the work that she has done as chair of the All-Party Group on Modern Languages. I know that she has been a passionate advocate of modern languages for many years. I wholeheartedly share her concern over the continuing fall in the number of students taking them.

Like the noble Baroness, Lady Benjamin, I wondered whether I should deliver this speech in French, but time was short. Like many noble Lords present today, I was fortunate enough to benefit from studying modern languages. I learnt French from the age of eight, when my family lived in Paris for three years. I went on to read French and Spanish at university. This was underpinned by Latin. I know that I am joined by many-but obviously not all-noble Lords in finding Latin both useful and fun. We have heard from the noble Lord, Lord Cobbold, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Sherlock and Lady Warnock, about the importance of learning languages when one is young and finding them fun. When the RAF posted my husband to Germany, I taught English and French in a German gymnasium. I managed to learn a little German in the process. I hope that I taught a little more French and English to my pupils, but who knows?

Languages have a role not only in preparation for the world of work but in the rather more old-fashioned sense of learning being a good thing. I reassure the noble Baroness from the very start that the coalition Government are working to ensure that languages are given greater pre-eminence, following the very worrying decline in the number of pupils who have been taking them over the past 10 years or so. Over that period, the proportion of students entered for a GCSE in a modern foreign language declined from a high of nearly 79 per cent in 2000 to just 44 per cent last year. There has also been a decline in the number of A-level students taking modern languages and a fall in the number of undergraduates studying language degrees. You end up with a vicious circle whereby enthusiasts and teachers are not going back into schools to regenerate and keep the pool going.

Do languages matter? After today's debate, I think that noble Lords are in no doubt about that-yes, indeed they do. Seventy-five per cent of the world's population do not speak English. The proportion of internet usage conducted in English fell from 51 per cent to 29 per cent between 2000 and 2009. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Butler-Sloss, recounted a sad story about the lack of French among wine buffs. French was always a language that one needed to discuss wine and food; one learnt it for that reason, if for no other.

Learning another language is important to the social and economic future of the country. A number of noble Lords commented on that. The noble Lord, Lord Hannay, made some very pertinent remarks about businesses needing graduates with the ability to hold conversations in other languages and who understand the cultural differences between the UK and other countries. This message is being made forcefully by a range of organisations, such as the CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce and expert bodies such as CILT, the National Centre for Languages. The noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, asked whether business would be enhanced by language skills. According to one estimate by the Cardiff Business School, a workforce with better language skills could allow businesses to contribute £21 billion more to the UK economy.

Various academic studies have shown that language learners show greater cognitive flexibility-as the noble Lord, Lord Broers, said, people with language skills stay mentally sharper in old age-and are better at problem solving and that languages help to narrow the gap between rich and poor students' attainment and to reinforce English language skills. The noble Baronesses, Lady Hooper and Lady Sharp, referred to this important aspect of learning somebody else's language as a means of helping you to understand your own language that much better.

What can we do about this? It is clear that we have a duty to ensure that as many pupils in this country as possible have the opportunity to benefit from language learning at school and from as early an age as possible. The coalition Government are committed to achieving this. Ministers are already working on measures to ensure that languages regain their pre-eminence within the national curriculum. My right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, recently set out plans for an English baccalaureate, which was mentioned in the previous debate and in this one. As the noble Lord, Lord Jay, pointed out, this consists of core academic subjects, including a modern or ancient language, alongside English, mathematics, science and a humanity subject. The debate is still continuing on

whether a modern or an ancient language should be compulsory. We feel that any school teaching Latin and ancient Greek would almost certainly be teaching a modern language as well. However, one may not be able to rely on that and certainly those points will be made strongly in the review.

I hope that the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, will welcome the commitment to review the national curriculum, which is designed to ensure that it meets its original intended purpose as a core national entitlement organised around subject disciplines. A number of noble Lords asked about the timing. We will be announcing the remit of that review later this year, but I take this opportunity to assure noble Lords that the study of languages in primary and secondary schools will form a very important part of those plans as we move forward.

Any increase in teaching foreign languages in schools will bring additional demands in terms of language teachers and their training needs. We also need to consider whether foreign language teaching should continue in all primary schools, as noble Lords have pointed out. I welcome the fact that the noble Baroness, Lady Benjamin, is relaying the schemes in her university to encourage primary school teachers as regards language teaching. It was announced in June that the Rose curriculum would not be implemented, but the funding will, of course, continue for this financial year.

We must look at steps to ensure that more students study foreign languages in higher education. The noble Lords, Lord Jay and Lord Hannay, mentioned the concerns expressed by our colleagues in Europe about the number of British students working in EU institutions whose effectiveness and careers are limited if they lack language skills. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, who has been clear about his desire to see more UK graduates taking up such positions in Europe and using their skills and influence to the benefit of the UK, the EU and the international community. As noble Lords may be aware, in order to encourage more British students to consider careers in the EU, an event took place at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office earlier this month, bringing together vice-chancellors, university careers services and languages staff to develop ideas on how to take that forward.

It is encouraging that the take-up of languages among students studying for other degrees is on the rise, but we still need to do more to engage and enthuse students to study languages in more depth. The work that the noble Lord, Lord Broers, and others in universities are doing to link engineering with a foreign language is welcome and will expand the breadth of opportunities for the students who take up those programmes. We are working to increase British students' understanding of the world and its peoples through spending time abroad during the course of their studies, for example through increased UK participation in the European Commission's ERASMUS programme. I will also mention the programme at UCL referred to by the noble Baroness, Lady Sherlock, which insists on a modern language for undergraduates. Recently I was told by a friend that their child discovered an interest in French that they had never found before because they wanted to go to UCL to read a completely different discipline.

Modern foreign languages remain classified as both strategically important and vulnerable subjects for which additional funding has been made available to ensure their continued

availability. I refer to the Routes into Languages programme that the Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, supported earlier this year with additional funding, allowing consortia of schools, colleges and universities in each English region to carry on their activities until the end of the financial year.

The decline in the number of students studying languages at university prompted the Higher Education Funding Council for England to invite Professor Michael Worton, Vice-Provost of University College, London, to undertake a review of the health of language provision in English universities last year. That review also has been mentioned and the recommendations are being taken forward.

I will pick up on one or two points. Perhaps I may write to noble Lords in response to questions that I have not answered. The noble Baronesses, Lady Coussins, Lady Sharp and Lady Warnock, mentioned the Language Ladder. Funding has continued until this year. The contract is now coming to an end and we will need to consult further on it, because obviously the programme had tremendous benefits. Several noble Lords mentioned the late Lord Dearing. In a debate such as this, we all feel his legacy and pay tribute to him.

The noble Lord, Lord Harrison, mentioned Beaconsfield and the language skills at GCHQ. The military has had an extremely good language school at Beaconsfield for many years, teaching all sorts of exotic languages, as well as the mainstream ones. I do not know the answer to the question that the noble Lord raised and I think that it would probably be best answered by another government department. I shall try to refer it to the relevant department for an answer. However, my understanding is that TA officers certainly also receive language training if their duties require it.

My noble friend Lady Benjamin mentioned primary schools, and I think that I have already talked about the implications for those schools.

In conclusion, I repeat that the Government are absolutely committed to restoring the pre-eminence of languages within schools and higher education. I thank the noble Baroness for giving us the opportunity to debate this most important area once again, and I also thank all noble Lords who have spoken so persuasively this afternoon. I know that I speak on behalf of my noble friend the Minister when I say that we look forward to working closely with the noble Baroness over the coming months to ensure that the curriculum review takes full account of the arguments that have been raised during this debate.