

Why Language Teaching Matters

*Jonathan Gayther, MA
British Council Romania*

Abstract

There is broad consensus within the language teaching community over the values of multilingualism and linguistic diversity. However the impact of the global economic crisis and the austerity measures taken by national governments have led to increasing frustration and disillusion with political elites and institutions, and a corresponding tendency for opinions to polarise. The value of multiculturalism has been openly questioned by the elected leaders of Germany, France and the UK and it is in this context that I argue for two things; that a more compelling case be made for the value of learning and teaching languages and that as educators we challenge some of the false assumptions made about the role of language training at university level.

Key words

language, teaching, multilingualism, value of learning, new methodology

In the first of what will hopefully be an annual conference I would like to set the processes of learning and teaching languages at centre stage and to share a personal view of the issues that I think we should consider in light of the challenging economic and professional conditions faced by educators throughout Europe. At a time when the benefits of multiculturalism and multilingualism have been called into question, the need to understand each other has never been more important. Teachers in public education systems feel demotivated, frustrated and increasingly undervalued as they have seen departmental budgets and in many cases, their own salaries cut. In this context we have to ask ourselves who would want to study languages or become a language teacher. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to provide some evidence of the scale and nature of the challenges from a UK perspective and to sketch out some possible answers and directions for debate.

A recent report from the Confederation of British Industry highlighted the fact that the lack of language skills amongst UK employees is genuinely problematic for firms who are seeking to expand their international activities. The problems faced by a monolingual workforce are indeed striking; while 72% of UK international trade is with non-English speaking countries, it is estimated that only one in 10 people in the UK workforce can speak a foreign language. The CBI report stressed

that UK firms competing in an increasingly globalised business environment value language skills highly, with more than a third of companies (36%) recruiting employees specifically for their language skills. As a result, language graduates have the highest mean salary 3.5 years after graduation ahead of that of graduates of Engineering, Mathematical sciences, Physics and Astronomy and Chemistry. There is at the same time in the Anglophone countries a widespread assumption that English is and will continue to be the lingua franca of business and industry. However, this is rapidly changing; as CILT has recently highlighted in *Why Languages Matter* (2009), on the internet which both facilitates global communication and drives much economic and business activity, English accounts for a declining share of internet traffic and, indeed, world GDP, moving from 51% in 2000 to 29% in 2009.

In spite of the economic drivers for increasing language skills, the UK has a chequered experience of adapting to the linguistic demands of the European land mass, even when restricted to the traditional prestige languages such as French and German. In terms of scale the problem appears to be getting worse. There has been a big decline in the number students studying a foreign language over the last six years. The number of students studying a language through to the end of compulsory education at 16 has dropped by a third since the government made them optional at GCSE (General Certificate of Education) level in 2004. Looking at the candidature for the 2010 national exams, the decline of French has been striking; it has nearly halved to just over 170,000 entries compared with more than 300,000 in 2004, and fell out of the top 10 most popular subjects in 2010. More pupils chose to study geography and art at GCSE level. Spanish meanwhile appears poised to overtake German at GCSE; with the numbers taking it rising to over 67,000 while German entries fell to around 70,000 in 2010. French and German are also among the subjects that students are most likely to dropout of after a year of study, providing evidence perhaps of the intrinsic difficulty of the subjects as much as a reflection of teaching quality. More recently, in August 2009, a Cambridge Assessment survey reported that pupils in selective Grammar and private schools were generally at least twice as likely to have chosen a foreign language as one of their post-16 Advanced level subjects than pupils in any other type of school in the survey.

Taken together, these findings point to a future where the study of modern foreign languages could become a marginalised activity in state-funded education which in turn could lead to structural shortages, not only in the skills required for economic competitiveness but also in those required to sustain and develop academic research and teaching in university language departments.

While national administrations, examination bodies and EU institutions via the Common European Framework of Reference specify and rightly stress the value of language competency in terms of transferable practical skills, the assumption that language learning is no more than a tool for business runs the risk of reducing our appreciation of the cultural value of increased understanding perhaps best

summarised in Nelson Mandela's statement that 'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.'

There has been of course, heavy investment by the EU over recent years through the Socrates and Erasmus programmes and the appointment of Leonard Orban in 2009 as European Commissioner for Multilingualism underlines the EU's commitment to preserving and promoting European linguistic and cultural diversity. This commitment needs to be seen in the context of the scale of the challenges to linguistic diversity in Europe. The Eurobarometer study on Multilingualism, launched by the Directorate General for Education and Culture in 2005, clearly indicates that while English is only the second most widely-spoken mother tongue in Europe, it is by far the most widely-spoken foreign language throughout Europe, with 38% of EU citizens stating that they felt confident enough to hold a conversation.

Looking at the work of the British Council with its partners in Europe provides further evidence that a broader appreciation of the benefits of linguistic diversity is possible. Understanding more about how different language communities interact and work together is at the heart of Language Rich Europe, a project which sets out to examine the learning and use of national, foreign, regional minority and immigrant minority languages in 19 European countries.

The British Council initiated and manages the project, having successfully bid for € 475,000 of co-funding from the European Commission within its Lifelong Learning Programme. Over the next three years to 2013, Language Rich Europe will highlight the roles languages play in education, business and broader society. The project aims to highlight good policy and practice and demonstrate the importance of languages in stable and prosperous societies. Ultimately the findings will enable informed decision making by leaders in government, business and society across Europe.

So far we have looked briefly at the scale of the challenges facing language educators, at some of the initiatives taken to promote multilingualism in the European context and the arguments employed to promote language learning. However, if we are to encourage greater engagement among the next generation of Europeans I believe we have to speak with a clearer more compelling voice. Above all, we need a better understanding of the aspirations and concerns of the predominantly younger audience we seek to influence if we are to persuade them of the value of learning and appreciating other languages and cultures. Viewed from this perspective, and as I have indicated, treating languages as skills for employment by placing them in the same category as for example, word-processing, while relevant will only take us part of the way.

I suggest that as policy makers and educators we have to become more effective at promoting some of the most relevant yet possibly overlooked benefits of successful language learning; the first is the emphasis we need to place on what could be

called the international dimension of language study. The opportunities for travel and in particular, quality engagement with the target language communities that studying languages at higher education level provide are unique even in the age of low cost air travel and should be defended as a key component of undergraduate level courses. At the same time there needs to be a better appreciation of the value of shorter, more flexible options for language travel in order to ensure that greater numbers of learners have realistic opportunities to broaden their horizons.

Secondly, we need to articulate the realisation that it's only through the study of another language and culture that learners really begin to develop an appreciation of their own culture and identity. Language learning (at its most successful) can and should be promoted to young people as a journey of self-discovery and as such serves as a powerful metaphor for the transition from youth to adulthood. This message would resonate with and provide a broader base for affective motivation among young people who are seeking precisely the kinds of insight and appreciation that we know successful language learning can provide.

Finally, and of fundamental importance is the understanding that successful, memorable, even enjoyable language learning experiences are key to achieving the mutual appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity. However, looking at the Higher Education context in the UK, there appear to be a number of obstacles to achieving these aspirations.

It would seem axiomatic that the study of languages should emphasise the interconnectedness of the modern world, and language departments themselves should feel like the most connected parts of any university campus. In my experience this is very often not the case. In particular, and as observed in a recent UK Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) report there is a tendency for language departments to pull apart and away from each other as each language claims unique importance in a spirit of competition that can obscure shared objectives.

The other and more serious obstacle concerns the way in which academic departments relate to multi-departmental Language Centres delivering training as wholly managed (or increasingly, as outsourced or privately-run) service units. Here is what the HEFC report has to say on the subject and I quote it at length as I feel there may be similar situations in universities throughout Europe. The report stresses the need to challenge the “false dichotomy which exists between Language Centres (erroneously perceived as teaching only language skills) and academic departments (who define themselves as teaching language through content and culture)”

“There is clearly a certain degree of tension between MFL Departments and

Language Centres, with the latter often being seen as simply providing ‘service’ language teaching or ‘basic’, ‘everyday’ language teaching. In fact, Language Centre teachers are usually properly trained specialist language teachers, whose

courses are developed for precise purposes and often include high levels of 'content', whether this be relating to culture, to business and society, to politics, to medicine, etc, whereas Language Departments often make substantial use of foreign language assistants who have little or no formal training in teaching their language as a foreign language."

The report found that foreign language academic departments lag behind language centres in terms of innovation and in the use of digital technology, tending towards conservative approaches. This is supported by evidence from analysis of submissions to the annual Research Assessment Exercise which shows that very few full-time staff are involved in research into language or language pedagogy, and very few language academics have undertaken any professional training in language teaching.

I began this paper by looking at the challenges facing language educators at a time of economic austerity and low professional morale and have indicated some ways in which the value of language learning can be made more salient. However, as I hope to have shown, the solutions are not just a matter of funding or content. In conclusion, I believe that it is questions of methodology and training that lie at the centre of the challenges we face and the greatest threat to the aspirations we share about the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning is the risk of subjecting enthusiastic learners to outmoded and unskilled language training. If the default approach to academic tuition is based on formal grammar translation as a perceived gold standard then it is not only a disservice to learners but also a lost opportunity to inspire and equip a new generation of Europeans with the skills and appreciation of the values of multilingualism that we hold dear. Language *teaching* really does matter.

Bibliography

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