

Language Trends 2003

Introduction

This information has been compiled jointly by representatives of the Association for Language Learning, CILT and the University Council of Modern Languages. It aims to provide an up-to-date picture of the situation of languages and identify the way that developments in the schools sector are beginning to impact on Higher Education and other areas of national concern. It is intended to make this an annual report, expanding and improving on the information supplied in future years in order to identify areas of concern, and support the development of the Government's National Languages Strategy.

Languages in schools post-14

A poll of schools undertaken this Autumn by CILT and the Association for Language Learning sheds new light on the situation of languages in Key Stage 4, following the Government's announcement that the subject is to be removed from the core curriculum for 14–16 year olds with effect from September 2004. A similar survey last year, done in conjunction with the *TES*, reported that already by Autumn 2002, 30% of schools intended to make languages optional, and a further 25% were considering doing so.¹

Increasing numbers of schools reporting languages optional in KS4

The results of the new study show that post-14 languages have been given optional status in 43% of the schools surveyed. The questionnaire was directed at all types of maintained secondary school, and replies contained a high proportion of selective schools. Among comprehensive schools the rate is higher, at 60%. Specialist Language Colleges have been excluded from the

figures since it is a condition of their status that languages should be compulsory for pupils of all ages.²

It is interesting that a similar proportion of schools to last year – about half – remain convinced that languages should remain compulsory. In other words, the increase in schools making languages optional appears to be drawn from the pool of those schools which had already said last year that this was being considered, rather than from schools which previously said they would retain languages' compulsory status. However, the number of schools giving languages optional status is likely to increase again next year as the government's post-14 proposals become statutory.

Social Inclusion

In organising this year's poll, CILT and the Association for Language Learning were concerned to find out what effect making languages optional is having on different groups of pupils. The results confirm last year's findings that the policy is having a disproportionate effect on lower ability pupils, and that schools with high percentages of pupils on free school meals and low GCSE pass rates are more likely to have withdrawn languages from the compulsory curriculum. 70% of responding schools with more than 10% of pupils on free school meals had made languages optional, as opposed to 31% of those where fewer than 10% of pupils had free school meals. 67% of responding schools with half or fewer of their pupils gaining 5 A*–C at GCSE had made languages optional, whereas only 38% of schools with higher-attaining pupils had done so.

This is of crucial concern in a globalising economy in which the need for language skills is not limited to managerial and professional jobs but is growing at all levels in the workforce.³

It also impacts on social and cultural opportunities and is likely to increase social divisions by limiting the horizons and aspirations of the very pupils who are most in need of having them raised. In the words of one teacher who replied to the survey, 'languages will become even more elite.'

Effects of different types of options – need for more guidance

Schools which had made languages optional were asked whether there is a 'guided' or 'free' choice for pupils, and invited to comment about the consequences of different forms of option choice for different groups of pupils.

Some schools have introduced a 'streaming' system whereby certain groups of pupils (generally those of lower academic ability) are guided into non-language options. Others operate a free choice system which even allows pupils with an obvious talent for languages to opt out. Both methods potentially do pupils an injustice: in the first case, pupils who may well have an interest or special motivation for studying languages are prevented from doing so;⁴ in the second case many able and talented linguists are being lost. Teachers' comments appended to the questionnaire particularly highlighted this point:

'It concerns me that so many able children don't opt for languages given a free choice – because of option clashes, perceived difficulty and more 'attractive' subjects.'

'Many very able pupils are dropping languages because they are set against 'easier' options.'

'The department was told that the school would guide pupils to do a foreign language but in practice they have had a virtually free choice.'

The organisations involved in the poll believe this shows there is a need for more considered thinking on the implications for pupils of all abilities of bringing in different option choices. Clearer guidance is needed to enable both schools and pupils to make secure choices within a longer-term perspective, and to ensure that the 'entitlement' to study a language in Key Stage 4 is a reality in terms of inclusiveness and equal opportunities.

Through their work with schools, both CILT and ALL will be encouraging staff and management to be more proactive in providing positive options which enable the maximum number of pupils to experience a successful language learning experience at Key Stage 4.

Rates of pupil drop out

There was considerable variation in the rates of drop out among pupils in schools where some degree of opting out was allowed. Very high rates of drop out (above 50%) were found in 22% of schools responding to the survey, with a tendency for larger numbers to have opted out this year (current Year 10s) than last year (current Year 11).⁵

In some, albeit isolated, cases drop out was extremely high. One school reported 40% of pupils in Year 11 not studying a language (last year's option choices), rising to 90% for Year 10 (this year's). This school also reported knock-on effects in Key Stage 3, with curriculum time being reduced for lower ability groups.

Of the schools that had made languages optional this year, 51% reported that more than half of their pupils had dropped out of language study in Year 10. The drop out was particularly high where pupils had been given a completely free choice (although these results are based on a very small sample).⁶

Respondents were concerned about the loss of status for languages across the school, with some reporting a year-on-year increase in the rate of drop out:

'In the first year when a language became optional we had about 50% of the cohort opt out. In the two years since then the situation has become worse.'

'Disapplication has already given languages less status.'

'Pupils are already saying in Year 8 that they do not see the point of working hard at languages because they do not intend to opt for them anyway.'

Clearly, damage is being done to languages departments in this situation. Schools should be warned against introducing ill-considered options systems which will weaken their ability to offer high quality teaching in Key Stage 3 and have a detrimental effect on the motivation of pupils at all levels.

However, there are also cases where large numbers of pupils are successfully studying languages within an optional framework and this good practice can be researched further and disseminated.

Effects on alternative qualifications

Feedback from the survey shows that the policy of removing languages from the core KS4 curriculum is having an unintended effect on non-GCSE qualifications in languages. Whilst languages were compulsory, some schools were providing alternative vocational or short course options in languages for groups of pupils not likely to attain good GCSE grades. Now the pupils who formerly took these options are allowed to drop the subject altogether there has been a significant decline in these alternative courses.⁷ At a time when Government policy is to encourage more work-related learning, this is a matter of concern which provides a development agenda for all concerned.

Effects on different languages

A decrease in French and German provision was reported by the sampled schools, as opposed to a small rise in provision for Spanish.⁸ This confirms figures provided by the DfES Curriculum and Staffing survey published this autumn which shows 53% of pupils in Year 10 studying French in 2002 as opposed to 68% in 1996; 19% studying German as compared to 26% in 1996, and 10% compared to 8% studying Spanish.⁹ We are identifying a trend where schools are replacing German with

Spanish as the second foreign language taught. The growth in Spanish, starting from a small base, is positive. However, there are serious concerns over the future of German, particularly in view of the fact that British companies place it high in the order of languages which they need.¹⁰

Effective support

One indication from the poll is that for the position of languages to be maintained in the secondary sector, there is a need for coherent support from all those responsible for the delivery of the school curriculum and in particular from local authorities and senior managers in schools. There is evidence that where there is effective support for languages they continue to thrive. In one school which reported 'both previous Head and new Head very supportive of languages', languages remains compulsory at KS4, with both French and German having equal status (school population divided), and under 5% in years 10 and 11 disappplied.

Another school reported: *'In our school MFL is going from strength to strength ... with backing from Senior Management Team, it all falls into place.'*

Local Education Authorities can also step in to set a high standard for language provision in an area. The report on an audit conducted by the MFL consultant in Leicestershire in 2002, which looked at both provision and attainment, was circulated to all secondary schools with a Foreword by the Director of Education, Jackie Strong, in which she impressed upon Headteachers the importance of language learning, stating:

'I believe that Modern Foreign languages have a broad role to play in our schools, making a unique contribution to such curriculum initiatives as citizenship and literacy... The challenge, now and in the coming years, for the LEA, its schools and its language teachers, is to ensure that as many young people as possible benefit from studying a foreign language.'

This was followed up by a well-attended subject conference for Headteachers and Heads of MFL, where the Director reiterated her message. Here we see an example of cohesion in an authority which is

actively supporting languages through its Key Stage 4 Strategy and making every attempt both to encourage schools to retain languages in the core curriculum at Key Stage 4 and to maximize student numbers in those schools which choose to make languages optional.

Yet in many authorities, there are no longer any specialist advisory staff for MFL and those advisers with general briefs may have very little knowledge of the MFL situation.

The poll also highlighted the problems which arise from staff shortages:

'Staff illness and the lack of good supply staff has had a very negative effect on pupil progress and pupils' perceptions of languages.'

'We had a big turnover of staff last year... and our timetabler believes in market forces.' (This school made languages a free choice from September 2002 and 63% of pupils have opted out of language study in Year 10.)

However, where staffing is stable, where the Senior Management Team is supporting and where the LEA provides guidance, pupils continue to study languages.

Effects on the university sector

In the autonomous sector of Higher Education, a 'free-for-all' in languages is already having an alarming effect on national capability.¹¹ Polls conducted by the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) over the past three years show that three-quarters of HEIs questioned have cut certain languages out of their provision – the disappearing languages include Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, French, Italian, Dutch and Swedish. For 80% of these Universities, decisions on axing languages appear to have been taken solely in response to local institutional demands, with no discussion of national or regional needs. Hilary Footitt, Chair of the University Council of Modern Languages, commented:

'It is extraordinary to me that at a time when the Government has developed its first National Languages Strategy, calling for more graduates in more languages, no one seems to care that actions by individual Vice

Chancellors could be *de facto* sabotaging the policy'.

Regional skills shortages

The problem is not simply one of universities finding it difficult to produce the teachers required by the DfES Strategy. In the wake of recent international events, Government agencies and Departments are reportedly struggling to find enough British graduates who have the language and cultural skills that they so desperately need. There is little evidence this year that action is being taken to rectify the situation. An up-to-date map of University languages provision in the UK shows that degree courses in languages other than French, German and Spanish are difficult to find outside London and the South East.¹²

Class bias

In social terms too, the impact of changes at school level has been to leave the class basis of university languages largely untouched: latest figures suggest that only 12% of entrants to language departments are coming from the lower social classes (semi-routine, routine occupations), below the average for all subjects which stands at 15%.¹³

Continuing high demand for non-specialist language courses

And yet languages are still being valued by young people: increasingly students taking non-language degrees at University are opting to add a language module to their other studies – recruitment in these programmes seems to be up this year by between 10 and 20%.¹⁴ If we look five years on into the future, it may well be that these additional language courses will be even more heavily subscribed, brimming over with students, filled by what we might call 'second chance linguists', students who failed to take languages when they were 14 and deeply regret the decision when they get to 18.

Notes

- 1 The results of the 2002 survey are reported in *Languages for Life*, issue 1, Autumn 2003, published by CILT.
- 2 Questionnaires were sent out at the end of September 2003 with a deadline of 17 October. A total of 146 responses were received. The low response (due to the short time frame) and sample bias mean that the results are likely to be indicative rather than representative of the national picture. However the purpose of the poll is to identify trends rather than provide accurate statistics. In particular, the percentages quoted in relation to sub-groups within the sample should be treated with caution since they relate to low base numbers.
- 3 See the Regional Language Audits co-ordinated by the Languages National Training Organisation, which merged with CILT earlier this year. These emphasise especially the need for basic language skills at customer interfaces such as reception and switchboard. For further details see www.cilt.org.uk/rln/audits.htm
- 4 Interestingly, though, a guided choice produces a lower rate of drop-out, see note 6 below.
- 5 22% of all schools reported 50% or more of their pupils had dropped languages in Year 10 this year. This compared with 12% of all schools reporting that half or more of their year 11 pupils were not studying languages.
- 6 Of the schools that had made MFL optional this year, 51% reported that half or more of their pupils had dropped out of language study in Year 10 (24% for schools that gave pupils a guided choice compared with 75% of schools that gave pupils a free choice).
- 7 Entries for GCSE short courses in French declined to 7,584 this year compared to 10,334 in 2001. Entries for the Entry Level Certificate in French were 10,706 this year as compared to 14,445 in 2001. Entries for German were similarly affected, though there was a very small rise in entries for Spanish for both qualifications (1,609 from 1,400 in 2001 for the Short Course and 2,701 from 2,637 in 2001 for the Entry Level Certificate). Full figures are reported in the *CILT Direct Languages Yearbook 2004* (forthcoming, January 2004.)

8 Almost a third (31%) of all the schools in our sample said they had fewer French classes this year and over a quarter (27%) said this was true for German. Spanish class provision had risen this year with a fifth of the sample reporting more classes compared with 10% reporting fewer classes in Spanish. 70% reported no change in Spanish provision (this figure includes schools that do not provide the language)

9 *Secondary Schools Curriculum and Staffing Survey: November 2002*, see www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/

10 Survey conducted by Reed Multilingual Solutions, 2001.

11 A snapshot survey conducted by UCML in July 2001 with a representative sample of HEIs showed that 77% of the sample (72% of the pre 92 and 83% of the post 92 institutions) had experienced cuts in one or more of the languages or/and courses they offered pre 1999. Languages which had been suspended included: Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, Polish and Hungarian. 93% of the sample reported major staffing changes since 1999, including non-replacement of staff, and voluntary and compulsory redundancy: '15 staff are to go between now and 2006'. At a conservative estimate, 130 posts in languages had gone between 1999 and 2001 within this representative sample. One national subject association said: 'We have real fears for the future of teaching and research in nationally important areas in the UK as a whole'.

For 80% of the sample, this rapid diminution in provision had been conducted solely in terms of a local institutional debate, with no mention of national strategies or needs. Only 27% of the sample recorded any concern being raised in their HEI about the implications of the DfES National Languages Strategy. In July 2003, UCML conducted a second representative spot survey of the state of language departments 'on the ground'. 52% of the respondents said that they had experienced cuts in one or more languages/courses between September 2001 and July 2003. These included French, Russian, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Hungarian, and Polish. 90% of the sample recorded major staffing changes, including non-replacement of staff (in one case more than 10 members of staff had not been replaced since 2001), and redundancy (3 institutions reported that more than 6 lecturers had been made redundant).

12 Language study by region 2001/2 (numbers of students)

	Fre	Ger	Spa	It	Rus	Chin	Jap	ME
NE	511	203	297	12	25	72	57	101
Y&H	1,876	740	1,072	357	194	187	162	99
NW	986	427	633	289	34	2	6	84
Mers	287	84	186	0	0	0	0	0
E Mid	362	369	59	97	11	0	0	
East	69	53	33	18	4	0	1	0
SE	2,176	938	752	479	168	32	138	57
Lon	1,715	655	1,302	386	243	258	97	320
SW	1,657	582	537	409	141	0	0	36
W Mid	1,577	792	411	291	70	0	9	0
Scot	1,622	644	914	345	143	39	134	75
Wales	653	391	538	261	6	0	32	13
N Ir	354	44	252	12	0	0	1	0
Total	14,412	5,915	7,296	2,918	1,125	601	637	785

(Source: HESA)

13 Accepted applicants by social class 2002 (Languages/All students)

1	Higher managerial	23.6%	19.2%
2	Lower managerial/professional	30.7%	25.7%
3	Intermediate	13.4%	12.9%
4	Small employers/own account workers	5.0%	6.0%
5	Lower supervisory/technical	3.0%	3.8%
6	Semi-routine	8.4%	10.3%
7	Routine	3.6%	4.6%
8	Unknown	12.2%	17.4%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%

(Source: UCAS)

14 Early returns from the Association of University Language Centres (AULC) 2003 poll suggests recruitment to University-Wide Languages Programmes is up by between 10 and 20%. Most popular languages are reported as: Spanish and French, with Chinese and Japanese also recruiting strongly.

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