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Overview on multilingual education in the United Kingdom

1. Introduction

In a globalised world it is clear that foreign language competences are key to providing opportunities for education, employment and mobility. I imagine we would all agree with this sentiment from our colleagues at The Languages Company:

“In the knowledge society of the 21st century, language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras, they are an essential part of being a citizen”

This is just as true for UK citizens as it is for European and international citizens, but it is clear that in the UK modern language learning has been in difficulty for some time.

The reasons for this are many, and it is not easy to identify a single solution to the issues we face in the UK. Some of causes of the reluctance to engage with modern language learning can be noted here.

Many people have an imperfect understanding or acceptance of the need to learn another language, an acknowledgement that even though English is very widely spoken it is not enough to know English. Young people in the UK fall back upon the global use of English but have not had the chance to understand the intercultural values of learning another language, the business benefits of speaking to clients in their own language – as evidenced in Willy Brandt's oft-quoted dictum:

“If I'm selling to you, I speak your language.
If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen!”

Many people have a lack of understanding of how language works – including especially their own language. UK school systems often do not teach English grammar and many young people would have difficulty in managing core grammatical concepts let alone ‘foreign’ concepts such as case, inflexion, aspect etc. – and of course this makes L2 learning more difficult.

UK citizens have much less exposure to the authentic use of other languages than do learners of English globally. L2 learning is enhanced by the chance to see movies, download apps, listen to music, read cartoon books in the target language – I must confess I learnt my French from Asterix books.

Despite increasing travel and vacations abroad, many UK citizens lack access to the language in its cultural setting – to *live* the language abroad, not just encounter it in a restricted tourist setting. There has been a reduction in the number of travel scholarships that used to provide young people with access to courses and ‘exchange’ stays abroad.

2. Educational context

UK educational statistics give rise to concerns about the future language competences of young people. The number of students taking secondary school examinations in modern languages has dropped considerably in a generation, and more rapidly recently: from around 350,000 French GCSEs (the examination at age 16) in 2002, to under 200,000 in 2010; from 78% doing a language at GCSE in 2000 to 44% taking a language in 2009.

The number of students studying modern languages at university has dropped considerably in a generation. In 2008 only 2.9% of the 1.6m students at university in UK were studying a foreign language as a major subject (though more as an ancillary subject) and this has led to a reduction in the languages offered:

“as many as a third of university Language Departments had closed in seven years”
(Kelly 2008)

It is clear that this may affect the UK's ability to participate in and compete in the world economy, and certainly impairs the cultural experience of UK citizens who are thus less able to enjoy the benefits that second language competence brings (including, according to recent press reports, a delay in the onset of Alzheimer's).

There are many contributory causes, and many professional colleagues and institutions are working to reverse this trend, with some successes more recently that may point the way to a more positive direction, some of which are outlined in the papers that follow.

3. Political context

The UK Minister of Education, Michael Gove, supports a new approach to language learning from primary school upwards, and says that modern language learning improves “the empathy [...] and cultural outlook of children”, and that “people learning a language understand their own language better”.

This is a very refreshing change from the previous administration, which actually discouraged students from learning languages by making them optional from age 14.

Many believe that this was done to help schools improve their exam results in the published league tables of schools' results – because obviously languages are harder than more generic courses such as ‘media studies’ and language exam results were seen to be negatively affecting the overall average exam results of schools. Perhaps as a result of this increased political support the UK will have more investment in the vital world of language learning

4. Language and mobility

This investment should also include ways of making it possible for young people to go abroad to really experience language and culture first-hand.

I was very lucky, because I went to a school that valued and supported language learning – in fact my teachers wrote many of the textbooks used by other schools across the UK – and as a result I was able to study both French and German to a high level, with a little bit of Spanish and Latin.

When I was a teenager, there were large numbers of student exchanges between schools, or “paying guest” visits and school trips that gave kids an insight into other languages, other cultures, other ways of life.

Sadly, there are fewer of these life chances for students now – if your family has a holiday home in France, that's wonderful, but for many learners there isn't always this kind of opportunity to see the world from a different viewpoint.

Simply going on holiday to Spain is not enough – it is the immersive experience of living with a family, building friendships, learning how to live surrounded by a new language and new experiences, learning how to question your acquired assumptions about how to live, when to have dinner, what to eat – this is a vital part of successful language learning, in my view.

5. Conclusion

This is an issue that will continue to engage people here in UK and across Europe and the papers from our contributors provide some interesting approaches to the issue, but I'm afraid that the core problem – the lack of motivation to learn a foreign language – will not be fixed as easily as we would all hope.

Let us hope that the ideas expressed here will help to influence government and policy-makers in the right direction. What I think we all agree on is this – a multilingual Europe is a great benefit to all of us, and the Barcelona accord sets us a worthwhile goal of mother tongue plus two foreign languages for all citizens.

If we could address this goal with a new and more motivating approach to enabling and empowering British learners and citizens to learn languages and participate in this multilingual community, it would be a great benefit to British society.

6. Contributors' papers

The papers from our three panellists go into deeper detail about the language learning situation in the UK and outline trends and projections for the future.

Dr Lid King (Managing Director, The Languages Company) outlines the UK's policy and experiences in teaching languages in primary schools in his paper *Languages from an early age*.

Linda Parker (President, Association of Language Learning) writes about the world of Secondary school language learning and how this is developing.

Professor Tim Connell (City University & Vice-Chair of Institute of Linguists) outlines the situation and developmental trends in language learning in adult and higher education.

7. Reference

Kelly, M. (2008): *Research review in modern languages*. Southampton: LLAS Subject Centre, University of Southampton (in partnership with UCML). Internet: www.llas.ac.uk/resource/downloads/2498/MLR_report_Research_review.pdf.