

Linda Parker (Association for Language Learning)

Languages in secondary schools in the UK

The English do not have a good reputation as speakers of other languages. The notion that the world speaks – or would be a better place if everyone did speak – English is deep in our collective psyche and colours our attitudes to learning languages, travel, doing business abroad and our relations with other cultures.

Yet there is another Britain – one where its own indigenous languages (like Welsh and Gaelic) are beginning to flourish once again, one where a huge number of languages are spoken in families, in our schools and on our streets (over 360 in London alone). A Britain where in a recent global languages competition for secondary school pupils children in the UK came third in the world, answering over 15 million questions. So perhaps we are at a crossroads in terms of our pluri- and multi-lingual future and state education has a vital role to play in this respect.

Most children begin their secondary education at age 11, although there can be small regional variations. Not all children attend state schools and overall there has been a growth in the number of pupils attending independent, privately run fee-paying schools in the last decade. In this country we have around half a million pupils in private education.

Compulsory secondary education (11-16) is divided into two phases, called Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. At the moment foreign language learning is a compulsory subject only at Key Stage 3, which roughly corresponds to ages 11-14.

Dr. King outlined the situation regarding primary language learning and you can see that when children enter secondary education they come with a variety of language learning experiences, both in terms of the language learnt in the primary school and the level achieved. It is a challenge for the secondary school to build coherently on these diverse experiences and to ensure progression. Some schools cope with this challenge better than others.

The languages most commonly taught in the secondary phase are French, German and Spanish. Of these three French is still the most widely taught (for reasons of geography and more practically, teacher supply). German comes in second place, closely followed by Spanish. Most children learn a language throughout Key Stage 3. At the end of this Key Stage and generally at age 14, pupils and their parents have an element of control over which subjects they will continue to study until age 16. At the moment the compulsory subjects at the next Key Stage (4) are:

- English,
- Maths,
- Science,
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT),
- Physical education,
- Citizenship.

Until 2004 languages were a compulsory part of the Key Stage 4 curriculum and the majority of pupils studied at least one foreign language until age 16. From 2004 onwards, as part of a revision in the National Curriculum, language learning was designated an “entitlement” subject which means that if a child wishes to learn a foreign language at KS4 then the school must be able to offer a language as part of the curriculum. It does not mean that a parent or pupil can demand a specific language.

As soon as these plans to change the status of languages were announced, the Association for Language Learning, the largest professional body of language teachers in the UK, staged a major consultation exercise with members. The conclusion was that if this measure were to be implemented, then we would see a serious decline in the numbers of pupils choosing to study a language beyond the age of 14. The Government went ahead with its plans and these predictions proved to be all too true.

At age 16 at the end of their 11th year in full-time education pupils in England take examinations. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the most common and well-established examination. In 2002, when the intention to make languages optional was announced over half a million pupils were entered for a language GCSE, by 2010 this number had fallen to just over 300,000. The reasons for this decline are complex – school systems which are not favourable to language learning; the ways in which schools' performance are measured by government; the wide choice of optional subjects; the view that languages are difficult; the unattractive content of the exam syllabus; the idea that everyone speaks English.

Moreover, what has become increasingly clear as language learning has declined at Key Stage 4, and what is of real concern, is the widening gap between social classes when it comes to languages education. Independent fee-paying schools have very high participation in language learning in the 14-16 age group, with around 90% of schools insisting on pupils in this age range continuing to study a language. In the state maintained sector, the highest levels of participation are in schools which select pupils by ability or which cater for pupils from more advantaged social backgrounds. Schools in areas of social deprivation with significant numbers of pupils from poor backgrounds have very low participation in language learning. And there are some schools which no longer teach languages at all at Key Stage 4.

All this has an effect on the later years of secondary education, from 16-18 years and we have seen here a decline in the proportion of young people who stay at school until age 18 choosing to take languages at Advanced Level.

Since summer 2010 we have had a new Government and like all new administrations in the UK, they come determined to change once again the state education system. We have a Curriculum Review which began in January 2010. The Review asks questions like: What should be the core subjects in the curriculum? What should the content of those subjects be? For languages this raises really important questions about the nature of our subject – is it for everyone or only for the most talented? Should learning a language be a compulsory for all pupils? And if so, how do we create successful routes to language learning for the less able student as well as the most able?

It will be September 2014 before any new recommendations are implemented. We are currently in a process of “consultation” and we have yet to learn in detail what our new Government has in store for language learning. As the national association for teachers of foreign languages, the Association for Language Learning has been part of the consultation process and has put forward the views of our members about the place of languages in the secondary curriculum as well as our firm belief on languages for all pupils.

So far, we have heard positive statements from government about languages. Here's our Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, on the importance of learning a language from age five:

Learning a foreign language, and the culture that goes with it, is one of the most useful things we can do to broaden the empathy and imaginative sympathy and cultural outlook of children [...]. Understanding a foreign language helps you understand English better [...]. There is no one who is fluent in a foreign language who isn't a masterful user of their own language.

But how this rhetoric will translate into policy remains to be seen.

Already a new target has been set for state schools. It is called the English Baccalaureate. From now, a school's success will be measured, among other things, on how many pupils achieve high grades on a defined number of GCSEs, one of which must be a language. This appears to be giving a boost to the numbers learning languages at Key Stage 4, although it is too early to have detailed data.

We must give credit to such initiatives which support language learning but they will also need to be backed by money and coherent strategies if they are to truly succeed. We have lost many hundreds of language teachers, for example, as languages in secondary schools have declined. We will need to build capacity in our schools once more, provide training for teachers coming back into the classroom, ensure that the content of courses appeals to a wide spectrum of young people and that our examinations are fit-for-purpose.

One thing we're sure about is that our new government is keen on academic subjects, rigour and traditional approaches to learning. Our education ministers are themselves mostly products of the British public school system (misleadingly, the public in their name means the most elite and expensive schools in the country) and they bring with them ideas about classroom teaching and curriculum content which worked well in this context but may not be as appealing to the “normal” English school pupil. But we need to widen access to language learning and to create conditions for success for those young people from the most deprived backgrounds, not just those from comfortable middle-class England. Our plurilingual society opens up enormous potential for languages in education and in our wider society and if we ignore the opportunities presented to us we risk repeating the impoverished cycle of secondary languages education in which we've been stuck in recent years.