



Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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Realities of and perspectives for languages in the globalised world: Can language teaching survive the inadequacies of policies implemented today at Leeds Beckett University?

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Abstract

Various newspaper articles report that British ministers, university representatives, exam chiefs and business bodies agree that foreign languages skills in primary, secondary and tertiary UK education are in crisis. Lower funding and policy changes have caused language skills deficiencies felt gravely in the business sectors. Funding and support initiatives pledged by policy makers appear to be election-driven, barely outliving newly elected governments. Others blame secondary school language curriculum for failing to inspire students to take up a language when they reach 13 or 14. Others still argue that severe A-level examinations marking deters students from taking up a foreign language at 6th form level, producing fewer prospective language learners for university departments. Community languages are also undervalued as small-entry languages could soon be axed from GCSE and A-level examinations. In a world increasingly interconnected, it is essential the importance of language learning be reinstated in all our educational institutions. This paper reviews two decades of the conditions of language provision in the UK in general, with an emphasis on Leeds Beckett University. It also attempts to answer two questions emerging from the author's personal teaching experience and reflections: What are the realities and challenges language teaching faces at Leeds Beckett University? And, how may we support language learners in fulfilling their

ambition to acquire the required skills to communicate effectively in this globalised world?

Keywords: language learning; policies; funding; challenges; possibilities; Leeds Beckett University

1. Introduction

UK linguistic skills base has been impoverished by successive government reforms, policies and funding cuts at a time when the relevance of languages in the ever more diverse and interconnected global world we live in is increasing, according to the British Academy. The lack of relevant language skills is losing the country £48 billion a year in international sales, highlights J. Foreman-Peck from Cardiff Business School; national jobs are remaining unfilled because applicants, 22% of them according to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) 2013 statistics, have no relevant language skills. To redress such alarming shortage, the British Chamber of Commerce is calling for “the next generation of business owners’ to be ‘born global’ with language skills” (as cited in the Manifesto for Languages . . . , n.d.).

Language provision at Leeds Beckett University (LBU) is deeply entrenched into a global perspective. It services global linguists with an array of languages ranging from the traditional French, German, Italian and Spanish to a number of lesser taught languages. Despite this thriving demand and wide-ranging offer, LBU has suffered, like the rest of UK educational institutions, from the deadly triangle of continuously changing government policies, exam board reforms and funding cuts that are squeezing language provision out of the UK. As a consequence, the number of languages offered by LBU has gone from 22 (traditionally offered until 2010), down to 19 (in 2011-13), then 15 in 2014 and finally 10 currently.

This article offers a language tutor’s reflection on the challenges facing language provision in the UK in general and at LBU in particular. Using a variety of sources, ranging from government documents, charitable organisations’ reports and newspaper articles to statements from university representatives, ministers and industry bodies, this article highlights the causes of language skills crisis as seen by representatives of the three UK education sectors. It also reflects on implementation policies adopted in schools at different key stages, as well as the impact of government cuts on university language provision. Furthermore, this reflection focuses on how the crisis has been dealt with in the Languages Department of LBU since the Higher Education Funding Council for English’s (HEFCE) cuts in 2014. The paper ends with some proposals for improving

the reforms introduced recently, not only to face the present challenges but also to make the provision more durable and sustainable at our institution, if approved by the university leadership. With this reflection the author hopes to take part in the ongoing discussion reviewed in this paper of the challenges of language teaching by sharing personal views on reforms that, if beneficial to this university, could be emulated by other institutions in the country that are facing the same challenges.

2. Causes of foreign language skills crisis in UK schools

2.1. Primary education

Prior to the introduction of the new national curriculum which was to make primary language teaching at Key stage 2 statutory starting from September 2014, teachers from hundreds of state and independent schools across the country responded to the 12th Language Trends 2013/14 Survey (Board & Tinsley, 2014).¹ They welcomed the new policy but expressed many concerns arising from their current teaching conditions and resources. These are discussed in the following two subsections.

2.1.1. Need for further training of primary school teachers

Most responding primary schools felt they needed training to boost lack of language confidence and competence prevalent among their staff, especially for Years 5 and 6. In fact, 24% of these primary schools reported that the highest level the members of staff who could be competent to teach a language is GCSE, a level they believed would not meet the challenging task of teaching the three main requirements of the new national curriculum, that is, reading, writing and grammar. Moreover, "33 per cent of responding schools (the same proportion as in the 2012 survey) [did] not have systems in place to monitor or assess pupil progress in the foreign language" (Board & Tinsley, 2014, p. 5). Such a low degree or lack of confidence felt by schools with regards to language teaching at primary level suggests that although this new primary languages strategy may be well-intended because it reinstates the statutory position of language teaching in UK schools, its designers, it appears, have aspired to introduce it without providing a strong foundation for it to stand on. Such a cart-before-the-bull approach seems too ambitious and unrealistic. Adding to this, the reins that are needed to lead this cart have recently been cut as the financial support previously available through local authorities or secondary school partnerships is no

¹ The Language Trends Survey is an annual survey jointly conducted by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) and the British Council to research the state of language teaching and learning in UK schools.

longer available to promote and implement this primary language strategy. 50% of the responding schools felt under pressure not only because of lack of financial and language resources but also because they felt they did not have sufficient curriculum time to integrate languages properly and therefore meet the new National Curriculum requirements (Board & Tinsley, 2014).

2.1.2. Lack of cohesion at the transition from Key stage 2 to Key stage 3

The survey reported a patchy picture of collaboration or progression between state secondary schools and their feeder primary schools as 46% of primary schools had “no contact . . . with language specialists in their local secondary schools,” (Board & Tinsley, 2014, p. 6) and only 18% of state secondary schools reported having contact with all their primary schools, “due to teachers’ workloads, financial constraints and geographical distance” (Board & Tinsley, 2014, p. 6) which itself cannot be overcome without the availability of adequate financial resources. Moreover, when there is evidence of language experience being developed or started in the primary school (99% of primary schools responding to the 2014/15 13th Language Trend Survey teach languages, with 38% of them having increased their teaching resources), there is no guarantee their burgeoning language skill will continue developing in the high school. Such efforts are usually regarded of very low standard by the high schools and of an insufficient quality to build on, as less than one third of state secondary schools see the pupils coming to them as able to “continue with the same language they learned in primary school” (Board & Tinsley, 2014, p. 6). Moreover, the latest report shows that take-up remains very low at GCSE and post-16. With such apparent lack of systematic and consistent collaboration between schools resulting from many conspiring challenges, it appears very unlikely that the newly introduced statutory status of primary language learning will bring any positive changes to the state of language teaching and learning in UK schools in the near future.

2.2. Secondary education

2.2.1. Growing exclusion of pupils from language study at Key stage 3

Both the 2013-14 and 2014-15 CfBT-British Council reports (Board & Tinsley, 2014, 2015) highlight the fact that although language learning is a statutory right for all students at Key stage 3, a process of disapplication is practised whereby low-achieving pupils are excluded from language classes in order to free them for additional tuition in literacy or numeracy, or maths and science are prioritised to avoid performance measure pressures. The 2013-14 survey has also revealed that

a growing number of just above 7% of schools have no foreign language provision "to all pupils throughout Key Stage 3." These language teaching practices which "are rarely seen in the independent sector" (Board & Tinsley, 2014, p. 6), render language learning an elitist activity when it is in reality statutory for all Key stage 3 pupils. While Schoolsnet (www.schoolsnet.com), the number one UK independent high schools guide for parents and teachers, counts 1,373 independent private high schools spread across 178 UK regions, the Department for Education statistics published in 2014 almost treble that number (3,268) for state-funded mainstream secondary schools in England. One can only imagine the staggering number of pupils who may be deprived of their statutory right to language learning because of the disapplication practice in schools, and the loss of potential linguistic skills the country desperately needs to develop but appears to be thwarting by the counterproductive practice of disapplication.

2.2.2. Lack of resources for continuous professional development

Like their primary school colleagues, high school teachers' access to continuous professional development (CPD) has been affected by lack of time and financial resources. The 2013/14 survey (Board & Tinsley, 2014) also points at the fact that the most common form of CPD training is the one provided by exam boards at a cost and during twilight sessions and/or during the school timetable. This means that schools wanting their staff to complete their CPD will have to find the financial resources to cover the cost for training them and the human resources to cover for them while they are completing their CPD, putting extra burden on the whole school's cost effectiveness and productivity. To counter such constraints, teachers resort "to online webinars and social media to access professional development" (p. 6). However, these online webinars do not come without their technological disadvantages and complications, such as possible two-way collaborative features unavailability and software incompatibility, to name only two. All in all, such constraints, added to the ones mentioned above, are likely to dampen teachers' enthusiasm for CDP, especially for language teaching, which according to the survey data, is at the bottom of the schools' priorities, most probably due to their lack of confidence in the success of such language learning policy. According to the survey report, 83% of state schools and 86% of independent schools believe "that implementing the new National Curriculum will be challenging," because they "are not confident that the changes being introduced by the government will have a positive impact on the teaching of languages in their school" (p. 6). Such fears have been confirmed by the 2014-15 survey, as only 17% of the 99% of the primary schools teaching languages have invested in extra teacher training and only 6% have recruited new staff to teach languages.

2.2.3. Reform and language provision decline at Key stage 4

One reform introduced by the coalition government in 2010 as a performance measure for both schools and pupils which secured for languages a firm place among the core academic subjects at Key stage 4 was the English Baccalaureate (EBacc);² it was rapidly adopted as an alternative to the previous GCSE examination. David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science (2010-2014), echoed by Bernadette Holmes, Speak to the Future Campaign Director and former President of the Association for Language Learning, notes that the EBacc had very encouraging GCSE results for languages in 2013 despite initial resistance from school leaders. "Today's figures show 44% of the cohort has taken a modern language in 2013, a rise of 3% on 2012" (Holmes, 2013). Where the EBacc had been adopted between 2010 and 2013, an increase of 50% in students' languages take-up at Key stage 4 had been witnessed, and for 31% of these schools the EBacc had been used to encourage students with English as a second/foreign language to take a qualification in their mother tongues. However, this success did not seem to transfer to A-levels. The 2013/4 survey (Board & Tinsley, 2014) showed "no evidence yet of any widespread positive impact of the EBacc on take-up for languages post-16" (p. 6). This could most probably be because from 2013 the prospects of such continuation appear to have been weakened as only 16% (down from 22%) of state schools and 66% (down from 77%) of independent schools make the study of languages at Key stage 4 compulsory. The survey report gives the figure of 30% of state schools which do not provide language for all Key stage 4 pupils, even though they are required to make language entitlement available to the pupils who wish to take them. The authors of the Language Trends 2014/15 report give further underlining explanation for such a decline in language provision at this level saying that "the 2010–2015 Coalition Government also withdrew targeted funding for Specialist Colleges, which formerly played a leading role in developing language teaching nationally and in their local areas" (Board & Tinsley, 2015, p. 11).

2.2.4. Deep crisis of language study post-16 and its impact on university language institutions

Many factors appear to have contributed to the alarming decline of language study at the A-level, the results of the British Council Survey 2013/14 (Board & Tinsley, 2014) reveal. 43% of independent schools, which have been traditionally providing universities with a steady stream of student linguists, reported a

² EBacc subjects are English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, computer science) and a language.

decline in this vital resource to university language faculties. This, the report suggests, appears to be a reaction to the perceived harshness and unpredictability of grading by exam boards, so students hoping to achieve highest grades to secure university places have to make strategic decisions not to jeopardise their chances. In addition, the state schools responding to the survey expressed their inability to support those few students who may wish to study a language at the A-level on the grounds of lack of financial viability. Adding to this, the survey reveals another example of lack of gradual progression in linguistic complexity between GCSE and advanced subsidiary (AS) level, which the respondents believe adds to “the difficulty of predicting grades at A2” (Board & Tinsley, 2014, p. 7); as a result, these schools do not believe the reforms introduced to the A-level through the move to a terminal exam at A2 will improve language take-up at the A-level after GCSE.

Another explanation for this decline in language take-up may be found in the fact that the majority of A-level students take three to four A-level subjects. Some of them take four subjects in their AS year, and very few take up to five AS subjects, as most university courses only require three A-levels to gain a place. This admission policy may contribute to the limited choice students have when they select the A-level subjects that are seen to be more likely to secure their future employment or university entry. Thus, if they have to choose between science, technology or maths (STEM) subjects they wish to continue doing at post-16 and university level, and the languages they so enjoyed learning and excelled at in high school, they do not seem to have a lot of scope for choice. My own son, with his high grade of A* (A star) in both French and Spanish GCSE is a case in point. He had to drop both languages to be able to take the only other four subjects he was allowed to take and in which he excelled, too: maths, physics, ICT and sports science. How many similar students have been discouraged to carry with them their languages because of this university admission policy? Lesley Davies, director of quality and standards at the Pearson exam board, sums up this situation in the following statement: “We mustn’t forget the environment we’re in – resources are tightening, and whereas before students might have done four or five A-levels, now those extra classes are being dropped” (Ratcliffe, 2013).

The A-level examination results released in the summer of 2013 alarmed the three main exam boards (AQA, OCR and Pearson Exam Board) who expressed, through their executives, the need for an inquiry into the reasons behind the sharpest fall in a decade in traditional modern foreign languages take-up at A-level.

With the exception of the 4.08% increase in Spanish uptake, German entries fell by 11.13% compared to the previous year, while French fell by 9.9%. Moreover, only 6.9% of those sitting the three languages achieved A* (Ratcliffe, 2013), while 5% sat physics, 7.3% sat chemistry, 8.8% sat biology and 19.2% sat

mathematics (Department for Education & Truss, 2013). Clearly, the August 2013 general sense of crisis felt and expressed by ministers, university representatives and exam chiefs shows the desperate state of school language provision in the UK that has a direct impact on the survival of university language provision.

Faced with the alarming Modern Foreign Languages (FML) A-level results, Andrew Hall, chief executive of AQA, called, in a statement quoted in a *Guardian* issue of August 2013 (Ratcliffe, 2013), for an evidence-based research into both the unpopularity of languages and low percentage of top grades among those sitting them. He said:

When we saw that languages were down again, we . . . said we need to move this away from anecdote to evidence to find out what's happening here . . . is there something in the design of the qualification? *We don't believe so* [emphasis added], but researching and challenging ourselves is important. (Ratcliffe, 2013)

What is interesting in his statement, however, is the apparent lack of willingness to dig deeper into the investigation, for he seems to take a partial position about what causes such deficiencies by exempting one area from investigating: the design of the qualification. Although he asked whether this might be due to the design of the qualification, he immediately disregarded such a possibility, but recognised none the less that challenging these disappointing results through research was important.

If any research is to be scientifically conducted and any findings are to be collected and then challenged without bias, every aspect of language teaching is to be challenged, from the way the content is selected and taught to the students to the way they are assessed, not forgetting the manner in which the conception of the qualification has been rationalised. There is a sense of apportioning blame in the exam body chief executive's statement, but away from this body, which seems to ignore the observation, highlighted by the British Council 2013-4 report, that the harsh marking of A-level language exams is making the language option a daunting prospect for potential A-level language candidates.

On a slightly more optimistic note and in the same August issue of *The Guardian* (Ratcliffe, 2013), Professor Michael Kelly, head of languages at Southampton University and director of the Routes into Languages programme, attributed the decline of traditional MFL A-level entries "to a growing interest in a broader range of subjects including Spanish, Russian and Arabic". The fact that maybe too many languages are offered and competing for the same candidates may explain the decreasing numbers of candidates for the traditional languages, but can the availability and variety of the lesser taught languages be blamed for this decline? The latter may be attributed to the way students are encouraged to take them. At the moment, a language is pre-selected for the Key stage 3

entrants by the schools (including those with a language college status) they go to, and only in Key stage 4 can these students choose a second language if it is provided. By the time they reach post-16, even if they had been judged very successful linguists, other factors (mentioned above) contribute to their abandoning languages at A-level. In an ideal world, UK schools' human resources and financial capabilities need to be supported consistently and continuously, as is the practice in continental Europe, in order to introduce students from the primary level to more than one language. The new National Curriculum aspires to achieve this, but there is no clear strategy indicating that language learning should be a statutory requirement throughout a UK child's school life from the primary through to high school and A-level, nor does it provide a clear budget or strategy of continuation between stages that would lead to a smooth progression to university.

In his January 2015 blog discussing the closing of language departments and the decline of language skills, Dominic Cummings, adviser to former Education Secretary Michael Gove, quoted the results of research conducted for *The Guardian* with a FOI (Freedom of Information Act) request, saying:

The number of universities offering degrees in the worst affected subject, German, has halved over the past 15 years. There are 40% fewer institutions where it is possible to study French on its own or with another language, while Italian is down 23% and Spanish is down 22%. (Cummings, 2015)

This appears, in a big part, to be the result of the dwindling number of students taking GCSEs mainly, in the 3 European languages by 39% over 12 years "(in spite of the slight increase in 2013 and 2014)" (Cummings, 2015).

GCSE language results (2013)		A-level school leavers with languages (2003-2012)		A-level & university stem subject entries (1996-2012)		A-level candidates for languages (1996-2012)	
French	↑ 15.5%	10%	Drop by 26% over a decade	Physics	3.1%	French	↓ 45% 22%
German	9.4%	11%	Drop by 28%	Maths & further maths	6.8%	German	
Spanish	25.8%	33% (Only rise over the decade)		Chemistry	5.1%	Spanish	
Total	50.7%	54%			15%		67%

Figure 1 Drop in the number of A-level language candidates (1996-2012)

Figure 1 shows how the decline in language take-up at A-level has affected language sustainability at university level in less than two decades. So, while over the past decade A-level and university STEM subject entries witnessed a 15% increase, the same decade witnessed an average 45% drop in A-level leavers

with French and German. And despite the 33% increase in Spanish speaking A-level leavers in the same period, and the exceptional 2013 50.7% rise in GCSE entries for the three combined languages, there has been a dramatic drop of 67% in the number of A-level candidates for the three languages, or an alarming 90% drop accumulated over 16 years, if we add the 23% drop in Italian.

The 90% drop mentioned above represents the 90% loss of potential language candidates for university faculties. This state of affairs is only going to worsen with the decrease of opportunities for young people to continue taking languages at GCSE and A-level, as highlighted by Jocelyn Wyburd (2015), Chair of UCML in her letter to the Minister of State Schools, Nick Gibb MP in 2015. Such further decrease may be worsened (see Board & Tinsley, 2015) by the recent language provision policies.

2.2.5. Government policies and assessment implications

The Department for Education (2014) conducted a consultation in July 2014, which led in the following year to a progressive introduction of the new government reforms (accredited by the exams regulator, Ofqual) of GCSE and A-level specifications. These were to become effective for French, German and Spanish from 2016 and for other lesser-taught languages from 2017. As a consequence, the three UK exam boards announced their decisions not to include a broad range of small-entry languages in the new reformed GCSE and A-level qualifications. This decision could seriously jeopardise UK's "future trade, diplomatic and cultural relationships with many future economic success stories" (de Bois, 2015). The future of these "small-entry," or lesser-taught languages, many of which are "community languages," looks as follows:

- AQA has decided to discontinue its A-level provision of Bengali, Modern Hebrew, Punjabi and Polish, and is considering discontinuation of other small-entry languages at GCSE.
- OCR will discontinue its A-level provision of Dutch, Gujarati, Persian, Portuguese and Turkish, and GCSE Dutch, Gujarati, Persian, Portuguese and Turkish.
- Edexcel will not redevelop its Arabic, Modern Greek, Japanese and Urdu programmes, and, like AQA, it is reconsidering its provision of other small-entry languages.

According to AQA officials, the decision is due to two reasons. The new government changes to the exam system and qualifications require that not only the reading and writing, but also speaking and listening skills must be assessed. D. Bassett (2015), Director of Public Policy at AQA claimed in April 2015 that "it will become increasingly difficult to recruit sufficient experienced senior examiners with

assessment expertise to set and mark” these skills. However, this statement appears to contradict and challenge the statement made a month earlier by MP Fiona McTaggart (2015): “I have spoken to a senior examiner in Polish and she assures me there is no difficulty in finding suitably qualified examiners in that subject, yet AQA is determined to abandon it.” One may add that past and current students who entered these qualifications have followed language programmes developed by language experts who taught and assessed all the four language skills.

AQA officials say that the number of candidates for qualifications in these languages is very low, citing as an example the number of 179 students who entered for A-level Punjabi in 2014. It is again not clear how AQA can justify using the small number of entries for these languages as a valid argument when these languages represent minority ethnic groups, and how it can ignore the official records that in 2014 the number of entries exceeded 4,000 in A-level Gujarati, Greek and Bengali, a 50% increase since 2004, while the same official records for the same year highlighted a drop of a third in French and German entries.

Similarly, OCR officials have made their decision on the grounds that only 1,700 GCSE and 600 A-level students entered for Turkish in 2014, ignoring the fact that the number of A to E grades achieved in this language was higher than those achieved in German and Spanish in the same year.

It is very interesting to see that the financial grounds seem to weigh heavily on the decisions of these awarding bodies, all non-profit organisations, and contradict their own officials’ claims: “These are not purely economic decisions . . . However, as an education charity, we have to look where best we can do educational good and . . . use our limited resources” (Bassett, 2015). One wonders, if this is not directly for financial reasons, why these awarding bodies appear reluctant to share the financial information that is driving their decision with the government, as Nick De Bois (2015), the Minister of State at the Department of Education points out.

2.3. UK universities

According to *The Guardian* issue of 17 August 2013 (Boffey, 2013), the number of universities offering modern language degrees dropped dramatically from 105 in 2000 to 62 at the beginning of the 2013 academic year. This meant the likelihood of closures of 40% of university language departments, with further 20 departments forecast to close within the next decade. To make matters worse, the pace of attrition in language provision was feared to increase, according to Mike Kelly.³

³ Mike Kelly, professor of French at Southampton University, former adviser on the Department for Education’s steering group on languages, now head of the government-funded Routes into Languages programme.

With reference to another aspect of this language crisis, ministers voiced their concerns about the danger of focusing on encouraging students to choose science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects over humanities subjects. In this respect, David Willetts⁴ (2013) said: “we need to keep a close eye on numbers studying modern languages in particular – one area in which UCAS applications were down.” It would be interesting today to find out if there is anymore any justification for his optimistic and hopeful statement that the increase in language learning at GCSE noticed then would “filter through to universities”, and whether HEFCE is still, as he claimed, “working with institutions on safeguarding modern language provision across the country.” This I believe is less likely, particularly now that a considerable number of small entry languages representing key economic players in the global market have been officially earmarked for withdrawal at A-level in the next couple of years.

David Willetts’ claim hides the fact that HEFCE’s teaching grant has witnessed nearly a triple drop going from £4.9 billion in 2010-11 to £1.6 billion announced in HEFCE grant letters for the period of 2015-2016, according to a statement published by Julian Gravatt⁵ (2014) on Wonkhe⁶ blog page.

It is obvious that these successive government funding cuts have affected teaching budgets of almost all UK universities since 2011, when a mammoth £940-million cut affected the teaching budget for that year only. Since then, universities’ teaching areas in general and language teaching departments in particular have been forced to bear the biggest brunt of the cuts by adopting various strategies ranging from more positive initiatives, such as creating local commercial activities, building international business links and hosting conferences, to more aggressive ones like increasing students’ fees up to the maximum £9,000 allowed by government from 2012 and seeking and sometimes even forcing redundancies by “cutting back on less successful courses” (Vasagar & Carrell, 2011).

Only those few universities known for their established world-leading research programmes seem to have been only minimally affected by lower government cuts in research funds, according to Sir Alan Langlands⁷ (Vasagar & Carrell, 2011). What is worrying is the fact that a reflection by Gareth Thomas, Labour’s higher education spokesman, (quoted in Vasagar & Carrell, 2011) still resonates in 2015: “At a time when all our major rivals are investing heavily in universities to

⁴ David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science (2010-2014).

⁵ Julian Gravatt is Assistant Chief Executive at the Association of Colleges (AoC). He works in funding, finance, pensions and regulation issues on behalf of FE and sixth form colleges in England.

⁶ Wonkhe was founded in 2011 by higher education professionals and others engaged in higher education policy and politics. According to their website, they are “not aligned to any particular policies, politics or interests” (<http://www.wonkhe.com/about-us/>)

⁷ Sir Alan Langlands was HEFCE chief executive from April 2009 to October 2013, then Leeds University Vice- Chancellor from 1 October 2013.

drive economic growth, cutting by so much the engine room of innovation in our economy seems even more illogical.”

3. The case of Leeds Beckett University

In March 2013 the then Leeds Metropolitan University started consulting its part-time and community language programme staff about plans to reduce its language provision by terminating certain lesser-taught languages such as Finnish, Farsi, Turkish and Hungarian that had become less cost effective because of their dwindling numbers of recruits. This move was made in response to a funding shortage from the HEFCE, vital resources which for years had enabled the university to charge reduced course costs to language students. This funding was first reduced by half in 2013 and then stopped entirely in 2014. The German undergraduate course was one of the early victims of such cuts and was followed by similar disappearance of the Spanish and French undergraduate courses in the next two years.

The university faced this funding crisis with determination, and as a commitment to maintaining the European and lesser taught part-time language provision, the Languages for All (L4ALL) programme was launched in 2013 allowing over 700 of our full-time students to join a free one-year beginner class in one of 19 languages of their choice (see Table 1), widening as a result participation in the language learning experience among all users of the university.

Table 1 Data from the Languages 4 All programme 2012-2013 report (LBU)

Languages in L4All programme	L4All Places on the part-time language programme
Arabic	Farsi
Chinese	Finnish
French	Hungarian
German	Norwegian
Italian	Polish
Japanese	Swedish
Portuguese	Turkish
Russian	Urdu
Spanish	
Semester 1 & semester 2 = 630 students Semester 1 = 260 students, semester 2 = 80 students	
Total number of L4All students in both semesters: 710	

Two years on, 1003 L4All spaces were offered to both students (undergraduate ad postgraduate) and staff of LBU through this thriving language learning initiative, confirming the words of Professor Paul Smith (Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Strategic Development at the then Leeds Metropolitan University): “We are . . . confident that our language provision will continue to be sustainable and successful in the future” (Leeds Metropolitan University plans . . . , 2013).

The success of the Languages 4All initiative is not without its challenges and shortcomings, however, and its sustainability can only be guaranteed by the continuing demand for our language courses. Unfortunately, we have been facing what appears to be an insurmountable challenge: By Christmas, the early euphoria of the September enrolment tends to be followed by the disengagement of many students. As a consequence, numbers shrink leading on many occasions to class closures sometimes within the first 3 weeks of the autumn term. There seems to be a combination of factors leading to this disengagement phenomenon. A few I have identified below, but there may be more to be teased out by further investigation:

- **Cost:** The L4All beginner classes are offered for free. Therefore, students appear not to give their language classes the same priority they would grant their main subjects as quitting the language class does not incur any financial loss, nor does it affect their achievement rate in their main subjects. Although this may be seen as legitimate prioritising, it reflects the general attitude towards languages, for even though students recognise that acquiring or consolidating their language skills makes them more attractive candidates especially for jobs abroad, they find missing their language class easy to do to focus on their other learning or work commitments. Their attitude may be also encouraged by the fact that the language classes are scheduled outside their main study timetables.
- **Time:** These classes start in the evening (from 6:00 pm onwards), which may be convenient for evening class part-time language students, but it is not always practical for most L4All students, who have spent all day at university attending their graduate classes in their main subjects, preparing and sitting for their main exams, meeting essay submissions deadlines or completing work placements. Moreover, as full-time undergraduates or post-graduates, they have a different semester and holiday timetable from the one for their language classes, so on many occasions while they are on holiday from their main courses, their language class is still running; consequently, they miss many weeks, especially in winter, either intentionally or inadvertently.
- **Access to course and learning materials:** The L4All students, the majority of whom are undergraduates, are issued a student ID number that attaches them to their language class and the materials on the Languages VLE (MyBeckett), which is different from their main course ID number. This causes them a lot of confusion, and very often they have forgotten to ask the student hub⁸ to give them the appropriate password to access their language learning materials online.

⁸ The student hub are Leeds Beckett University's student help services.

- Assessment burden: Until the 2014/2015 academic year language students had to sit for exams in the four language skills. This requirement has now been waived allowing those students who were reluctant to prepare and sit for exam to complete their course without any pressure or anxiety from fear of failing assessments. However, some students still enrol on the award-bearing route, but because of study or work commitment pressures, they have occasionally not completed their language assessment. This is another illustration of the priority perception they have about their language course. It is perceived as an offer of an elective subject, particularly by the undergraduate and post-graduate students.

Under the present financial constraints, the success of a language course seems to be equated not so much with the enthusiasm and motivation of those who have enrolled in it but with the number of students attending it. The latest Languages for Work (L4W) initiative was introduced in French, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese at the beginning of the 2014 academic year as a response to a real need from students. However, it seems to have had one main purpose: that of boosting language student numbers: It lasted only two weeks when it appeared that the number of students who wanted to learn a language for work purposes did not reach the required number of over 15 per language group.

The decision was then made to merge all beginner groups, including the L4W students who were encouraged to join the general language classes, since both groups were at beginner level. Except for a tiny minority, most of those L4W students stayed another two weeks after this forced reconversion before quitting the course. There was a real miscalculation here as such a merger did not rectify the number problem but instead made it worse.

Attrition does not affect the L4All and the ephemeral L4W programme only. It permeates all levels of the part-time language courses in the same manner, making it difficult to sustain large groups at the advanced levels where different levels are forced to coexist in the same groups, a measure taken so these levels may survive closure. This arrangement is not without its own challenges for both students and tutors, for the former have to cope with the difference in level within their group, and the latter have the arduous task of differentiating work for their mixed ability groups. Unfortunately, but understandably, while co-existence is tolerated or endured generally, there are times when it is rejected by the students who prefer or feel forced to quit. When they do quit, they claim back their registration fees, putting more financial burden on the institution.

These challenges threaten the sustainability of our language provision because at the moment we have a counterproductive one-size jacket to fit all shapes and forms of our students' needs, and the reforms that we have introduced do not seem to have been implemented adequately. So, what perspectives can we explore

to make sure our language provision not only survives the financial challenges and language learning policies reviewed above but achieves a guaranteed sustainability? Before answering this question, it is worth stressing here that sustainability is measured by the number of recruits, and not their motivation to enrol.

4. Suggestions for the survival of language provision at Leeds Beckett University

After the loss of HEFCE's language funds, the sustainability of language programmes with the limited resources of the university has become more vital than ever before. Achieving the survival of language provision at LBU is not likely to happen, however, if the problem of attrition is not resolved. This requires a complete overhaul of the part-time language programme timetable, so the question arises: What shape might this take?

At present, the academic year lasts 26 weeks, during which the 4 language skills are taught (and assessed for those students who have enrolled in the award-bearing route). However, not all beginner or elementary recruits stay on the course after Christmas. Many factors contribute to this disengagement.

First, undergraduates usually find it very difficult to commit to a 26-week long course, especially when they have to interrupt their attendance to complete work placements, undergraduate assignments, or to take up evening part-time jobs to fund their courses. Usually, this happens after Christmas.

Second, not all beginners need to start from the same learning point, and the way they tend to be grouped at the start contributes to the problem of attrition as those who are more able feel held back by the real beginners or slow learners and quit because they do not feel challenged and stimulated enough. Sometimes, it is the others who quit because they feel threatened by the more able ones.

Third, while the majority of the beginners need to focus for a whole term on learning and consolidating their knowledge of the language basics, such as the script and the sound system, especially of the non-European languages, namely Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Greek, Japanese, Russian, and Turkish, others only want to develop their speaking skills in the language as they are already capable of reading and writing the script.

In the same way that the non-award bearing route has been introduced and embraced by some of the students, a more sympathetic learner grouping should be implemented. This may mean smaller group sizes: They are more likely to guarantee the survival of the level than the inflated mixed-ability groups. This also could reduce the likelihood of mixed-ability groups and therefore the burden of differentiation at the higher levels, if the discrepancy in levels has been addressed efficiently at the beginner and elementary levels. Another thing that may help eradicate this phenomenon is allowing the students to re-enrol at the same level,

even if they have completed it successfully if they do not feel confident enough to progress onto the next level. In addition to the 26 weeks, another five or six weeks could be added in the summer to answer the student demand for extra speaking classes, at all levels. This opportunity has been given to European languages but needs to be extended to other lesser-taught languages.

Finally, our institution could reduce its losses in the event of students withdrawing from the course and still apply a fair treatment to them by refunding their money only if they withdraw in the third week of enrolment. Some international institutions apply a non-refund policy, which does not seem to affect the number of recruits and in fact eliminates possibilities of withdrawal, as suggested by one participant⁹ at the second Languages in the Globalised World conference, organised by Leeds Beckett University.

Table 3 shows what the timetabling of the part-time language course would look like if the suggested changes are implemented, and provided it coincides with the undergraduate timetable.

Table 3 Partially reformed timetable and course structure for the part-time language programme at LBU

Enrolment completed and paid per term	Term 1 (13 weeks)	Term 2 (13 weeks)	Summer conversation weeks (5-6 weeks)	
Beginner (A1)	Reading & writing, the script & the sound system	Listening & speaking	– Free to L4All students only – Fees refundable if withdrawal after 1st or 2nd week only	Developing pronunciation & oral comprehension skills
Elementary (A2)	Reading & writing	Listening & speaking	– Free to L4All students only – Fees refundable if withdrawal after 1st or 2nd week only	Developing communication skills
Levels from intermediate to proficiency	26 weeks' course unchanged		Consolidating communication skills	

The present author recognises that some empirical research to validate the above proposals is needed. For this to happen, recommendations such as the restructuring of the academic year from 26 weeks to three 10-week block sections, for instance, need an opportunity for trial to assess their effectiveness and feasibility before final implementation. At the moment, they only reflect the author's own reflections based on her individual teaching experience within the

⁹ Professor Ivo Vasiljev, Prague Linguistic Circle, Czech Republic (27 May 2015).

Languages Department of LBU. This requires a lot of courage from management as it means a departure of our institution from a very familiar, tried and tested academic year structure to an innovative one that nonetheless would better reflect the needs of our language students and their availability for learning.

5. Conclusion

This article has discussed the thorny issue of language skills crisis in the UK's various education sectors and how such challenges play out in the context of LBU. What seems to emerge from the discussion is how unclear the position of various governmental organisations is about the importance of languages in the UK. On the one hand, through various declarations and policies government officials highlight the crucial role languages play in the promotion of England's economy globally, and, on the other hand, policies that have been implemented since the 1990 under the auspices of successive governments have been sending conflicting messages that have thwarted the implementation of an efficient, strong and durable language strategy on the ground. Rather than recognising it as an indispensable part of national and human interaction that is, like STEM subjects, essential for successful global transaction, the integration of languages in the educational system has been unsystematic and heavily dependent on student numbers and how much money language entries can potentially generate. Because of the various reasons mentioned above, language teaching has not been able to compete on an equal footing with other subjects, consolidating further the view that languages may not be essential to producing well-rounded graduates ready to compete in the global job market. As a consequence, whenever cost effectiveness has been the sole yardstick to measure the success and the survival of language provision, limited interest in languages has been ignored, and their provision swiftly terminated because it was judged uneconomical. It is a fact, not to be ignored, that language, which is part of the humanities subjects, is an essential tool in honing skills that are essential in science. We need it to form a logical argument and defend it when put under scrutiny, and we cannot solve problems or think and communicate clearly and effectively without it with the rest of humanity, which happens to use a variety of "modern" and "community languages," all essential for our social, academic and professional functions, be they national or global. It is high time a strong message was sent to everyone concerned that if Britain wants to create a sound and cohesive social structure that has an effective presence on the world scientific, economic and geopolitical arenas, languages must be every child's and every young person's prerogative, not simply the preserve of the 7% in private education and the fortunate affluent élite.

The repercussions of the recent reforms discussed above are far-reaching as they affect all aspects of UK education, which include supplementary schools run by local communities, state and independent schools as well as adult and further education. The disappearance of small-entry languages in the next two years will have hugely damaging implications not only for individuals wishing to learn languages to enhance their prospects in life, but also for schools wishing to develop these languages as well as community users of these languages, who may become marginalised at a time when the government is striving to improve intercultural communication both within and outside the country. More importantly, young people will not be able to compete in the global market because of lack of language skills. As a consequence, the country will not be able to exercise effectively its trading role across the world, nor will it have a strong international reputation that would give it a global influence. Bernadette Holmes (2015), Campaign Director of Speak to the Future, summarises the urgency to maintain languages in these poignant terms:

These decisions make no sense. Languages matter more than ever to community development, to social mobility and to our economy. Our rich and diverse language capital makes the UK the most attractive place for inward investment. We need to recognise and value the multilingual capabilities of so many of our young people and build our future upon them. At a time when business is increasingly hyper connected across the globe, it is the very languages which face the axe that would be significant assets to our success and to the prosperity of those who speak them. To say nothing of the intrinsic linguistic and cultural value of these languages which will no longer be taught and assessed in our schools.

What UK language teaching and learning needs is stability and continuity, for which there seemed to be a glimpse of hope as in May 2015¹⁰ the conservatives joined the Labour party in a commitment to save the GCSE and A-level exams in languages from withdrawal. Was this a real turning point for languages after the strong mobilisation and campaign led by Speak to the Future and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages which launched its Manifesto for Languages (n.d.) in 2014 or a mere after-effect of the euphoria of the elections? The faith in languages in the UK may not survive yet another empty pledge.

¹⁰ See recent updates on the Speak to the Future Campaign (<http://www.speaktothefuture.org>).

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