

National Languages Policy Workshop, Cambridge, 30 October 2015

Report on the morning session

Wendy Ayres-Bennett opened the workshop by noting the timeliness of the event in view of the publication of a number of policy documents in the last two months, including *Global Futures* in Wales, a *Scots Language Policy*, and an Ofsted reports on Key Stage 3, which highlights concerns about the level of achievement in Modern Foreign Languages. The aim of the workshop was to help map out where the responsibilities for language sit within government, to encourage dialogue between different government departments and with researchers, and to promote greater prominence for languages nationally. She emphasised the benefits of adopting a holistic approach, since UK language policy concerns not just foreign language learning, but also the protection and promotion of the indigenous languages of the UK, as well as community or heritage languages. Language policy is not just about foreign language learning, but deals with key issues for the UK today – national security, diplomacy and conflict resolution; community and social cohesion; migration and identity. She noted that as well as the 8 departments and organisations represented in the presentations this morning (the Ministry of Defence, UK Trade and Investment, the Department for Education, HEFCE, GCHQ, Education Scotland, the Welsh Government and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Northern Ireland), there were also representatives from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ofsted, the Defence Centre for Languages and Culture, and the British Academy. Cambridge has invested in research into, and promotion of, public policy in a number of ways including the Centre for Science and Policy and the Strategic Research Initiative in Public Policy, and it was hoped that this would be the first of a series of such events.

Baroness Coussins, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary on Modern Languages and President of Speak to the Future (audio available at <https://soundcloud.com/university-of-cambridge/sets/camlangpol-2015>)

Baroness Coussins opened by emphasising the need for what she called a National Languages Recovery Programme. She had set up the APPG in 2008 when she discovered there were hundreds of APPGs but nothing on modern languages. Its Language Manifesto had been widely circulated before the last general election. Baroness Coussins focuses on linguists as well as languages, for instance by lobbying on behalf of the Afghan interpreters to come to the UK and in support of a UN resolution to protect interpreters and translators in conflict zones. Baroness Coussins underlined the wide-ranging impact of languages for society, including business, the public sector, public service abroad and the NGO world, citing the case of the Ebola crisis where a website had reported that monitoring of French-language sites could have helped earlier detection of the spread of the disease. She provided a number of examples of the gloomy picture for modern languages, including the loss of over 45 modern languages degrees or indeed whole departments in UK universities, and the lack of native speakers of English in the translation and interpreting departments of the EU or the UN. Whilst there are policies for languages in the UK, progress is not always evident: whilst Ebacc has had a positive impact on GCSE entries, the effect of Progress 8 is more uncertain. She argued that there should be an audit of the civil service to identify language skills. Above all, there needs to be a coherent, cross-departmental strategy for languages.

Christine Adamson, Ministry of Defence (powerpoint attached, audio available at <https://soundcloud.com/university-of-cambridge/sets/camlangpol-2015>)

Christine provided a fascinating overview of the importance of effective communication for ‘the successful application of military and diplomatic influence’ (*DCLP*¹). The ‘Whole Force Concept’ is used and pre-existing language skills are identified, whether from heritage speakers, second language speakers, or ‘lapsed linguists’. Christine commented on the challenges associated with finding linguists when needs arise, and the need to identify and track those with pre-existing language skills. MOD is seeking to address the under-representation of the UK in international organisations.

¹ Defence Culture & Language Policy

MOD language training is conducted in the main at or through the Defence Centre for Language and Culture (DCLC), part of the Defence Academy at Shrivenham. DCLC was opened in 2014 and is the successor to the former Defence School of Languages. Students are trained to the NATO STANAG Ed 4 standards (not formally mapped onto other standards) which includes 5 levels (1. Survival; 2. Functional; 3. Professional; 4. Expert; 5. Educated mother tongue) over 4 skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). Students receive up to 2 years language training, including, importantly, cultural skills, and training from Level 2 includes a period of immersion in the appropriate country. The core languages, taught by MOD personnel and augmented when needed by contractors, are Arabic, Dari, Farsi, French, Pashto, Russian, Spanish, and English as a foreign language. All other required languages are taught by contracted tutors. DCLC is engaged in a fundamental re-design of its language courses focussing on employment skills (e.g. Defence Attaché/operational linguist ...) and proficiency levels adequate to the task: students learn what is necessary for the role. Finally, she mentioned the existence of the Cross-Whitehall Languages Focus Group which meets on a regular basis and is a means of exchanging information, knowledge and best practice across government.

Susannah Poulton, UK Trade and Investment (audio available at <https://soundcloud.com/university-of-cambridge/sets/camlangpol-2015>)

Susannah made an impassioned plea for us to work in partnership with her. There are 9 culture and language advisors for the regions dealing with the companies in that region; she is the sole representative for 6 counties in the eastern region. She helps, for instance, SMEs with exports and with breaking into international markets. Often businesses think of culture and language as one of the last considerations in this because culture is thought of as ‘fluffy’. They underestimate the important of language and culture skills; for instance, they see no need to translate their website, yet 70% of internet searches are not in English. Susannah ran 25 workshops on language and culture in the region last year, and these are always oversubscribed. She mentioned a scheme - Postgraduates for international business – whereby postgraduates offer language help to businesses (it became clear in the questions that representatives from local universities were unaware of this). One of the difficulties is that it is invisible where companies lose business because of lack of language skills, but there is evidence from the work done by James Foreman-Peck and others that the cost to the UK is considerable.

John Hopper, Department for Education (powerpoint attached)

John started by making the case for why school pupils should learn a foreign language: it is ‘a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other culture’ (National Curriculum Framework Document 9/13). He presented some statistics which showed the trends since 2010 in GCSE and A level take up, in particular the rise in the proportion of the KS4 cohort in state schools being entered for a language, but the picture is not straightforward with certain languages faring better than others. The new national curriculum makes a foreign language compulsory at KS2, and continues compulsion at KS3. There are 9 projects across the country to boost CPD for primary and secondary teachers to help them teach the new curriculum. There are new syllabuses for MFL GCSE and A-levels which will be taught for French, German and Spanish from 2016. The new syllabuses should contain content relevant to the countr(ies) where those languages are spoken. Discussions are still being conducted regarding qualifications for the lesser-taught languages. He noted that pupils starting Year 7 in 2015 should take the full range of EBacc subjects when they do their GCSEs. This expectation will be reflected in performance tables, so would also apply to Academies, even though teaching the National Curriculum subjects is not compulsory in those schools. He mentioned the forthcoming announcement on this [cf. statement by Nicky Morgan, 2 Nov 2015]. One of the challenges is to provide enough well-qualified teachers.

In the question session a number of issues were raised: Ofqual’s unpredictable and harsh gradings for MFL; the question of native/heritage language speakers and the need to support schools in this area. It was also noted that Arabic is considered a core language for the MOD, yet Edexcel is proposing to scrap A-level Arabic (however, the government is trying to save qualifications in the so-called lesser-taught languages and is in discussion with the awarding bodies and Ofqual).

Linda Allebon, Hefce (powerpoint attached)

Modern languages and related area studies are considered subjects both strategically important and vulnerable by HEFCE (alongside STEM and quantitative social science). Linda provided data for A-level entries for modern languages since 2001 (again showing decreasing numbers for French and German, but an increase for Spanish and other languages). In the case of undergraduate entrants to modern languages there is a sharp downward trend, including for Iberian studies, with part-time enrolments being particularly hard hit. There has been a strong increase in institution-wide language programmes (vs. specialised programmes). There are a number of uncertainties ahead, but HEFCE would encourage a joined-up approach from Schools → HEIs with active engagement of Government and employers, as has occurred for the STEM subjects.

Head of Language, GCHQ

GCHQ employs about 300 linguists, and as such is one of the largest employers of linguists.

There is no *policy* as such, but there are key areas:

- *Recruitment*: ML graduates and of native speakers with degrees (UK nationals only) are recruited. The Year Abroad was mentioned as a potential problem for any later vetting process and students should be careful to not to 'disappear' for months which could later cause issues. There is a shortage of good candidates in certain languages (e.g. Mandarin, Russian) and there is not consistency in the language competence of graduates from different universities. It is expensive to retrain MFL graduates, but there are not enough speakers of scarce languages so GCHQ invests heavily in language retraining programmes. The lack of a holistic strategy from primary to university was mentioned as one of the possible causes for the small pool of good applicants.
- *Outreach*: Work is done with a range of secondary school students focussing on key issues such as Year 9 (pre-GCSE options); 120 secondary schools were visited last year with language taster sessions. Work is increasingly being conducted with academic and other institutions with greater involvement in research projects and policy workshops. GCHQ has also strengthened its engagement with the Chartered Institute of Linguists to help further professionalise its linguist workforce.
- *Training*: Employees may be re-trained in rare languages to one of five levels; there is also 'maintenance' training and cultural training. The aim is to cover as many languages as possible (there are 30 primary languages, 30 secondary, plus a range of other languages of 'occasional need').
- *Pay*: Language bonuses are offered for those who progress through the levels or who broaden their range of languages (e.g. acquiring a new dialect of Arabic). There is an ever-shrinking pool of linguists externally from which to recruit, so the bonus pay packages are seen as an essential tool in ensuring that good linguists are recruited and retained in GCHQ.

A more holistic approach to languages in the government minds is required to tackle these issues.

In a response to a question, it was noted that specialists in linguistics might be able to help, e.g. with the identification of rarer languages.

Louise Glen, Education Scotland (powerpoint attached)

Louise opened by playing a message from **Dr Alasdair Allan**, the Scottish Government's Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, which emphasized the importance of language policy in Scotland. Louise is a Senior Education Officer at Education Scotland, having taught languages for over 20 years, and is the policy lead for the 1+ 2 (Mother tongue + 2) policy at Education Scotland. Of the 3 indigenous languages in Scotland, there has been a policy for teaching English for 50 years and for Gaelic for over 35 years, but the Scots language policy only dates from September 2015, aiming to raise the language's profile and to value its heritage. Louise provided a very interesting history of language policy before the 1 + 2 policy. Up to 2008 qualifications in four European modern languages were offered (French, German, Spanish, Italian) together with Latin and Gaelic by the one examining board in Scotland, after which Urdu, Mandarin and Cantonese were offered (the latter

being taught notably in private schools). From 1977 on policy changed a number of times regarding the number of years languages should be compulsory and in which school years. In 2011 with the SNP majority and cross-party agreement the EU 1 + 2 model was adopted, to be rolled out over two Parliaments: this very ambitious project, to be achieved by 2020, requires the teaching of the first foreign language from P1 to S3 (i.e. a 10 year span) and the teaching of the second foreign language to be introduced from P5 at the latest. There is no hierarchy of languages, but L2 must be a living language, able to be studied up to National Qualification level. Primary teachers are committed to the change and are being upskilled using a variety of means, including sending them to the relevant countries for immersion. There is also a welcome plan to enhance the transition from primary to secondary school.

In the discussion a question was asked about provision for those who are already multilingual (i.e. 2 + 2 or even 3 + 2). Louise reported that work is being done with heritage language speakers and with new refugees in collaboration with ESOL colleagues.

David Heath, Welsh Government (powerpoint attached)

David (with his colleague John Pugsley) outlined the background to the new policy, *Global Futures*. In 2011 the Welsh government published 'Supporting Triple Literacy', offering guidance to schools teaching languages at KS2 and KS3. The Language Trends survey for Wales (2015) pointed out some of reasons for the low uptake at KS4, including languages not being valued by pupils and parents and the advantages of existing bilingualism not being exploited for additional language learning. Amongst the barriers to the uptake of languages are option blocks and the subjects against which MFL are 'competing'. The new document sets out an ambitious 5-year plan and has been developed in partnership with a range of stakeholders, represented in the steering group, chaired by Glynn Downs. The aim is for learners in Wales to become 'Bilingual plus 1', with the formal teaching of a MFL from Y5 on. 'Centres of excellence' have been set up, and there is a mentoring scheme whereby final year undergraduates mentor Y9 pupils. The plan is supported by the language institutes and we are also working with them to look at locating centres in Wales. Additionally, the use of digital technologies is being explored to improve the teaching and delivery of MFL.

Mícheál Ó Mainnín, Queen's University of Belfast (powerpoint attached)

Mícheál started by pointing to the absence of language legislation in North Ireland, and the difficulties for elaborating policy in a context where there is a fractured community and conflicting perceptions of identity. The Belfast Agreement (1998) made reference to the languages of the various ethnic communities, but the commitment to an Irish Language Act which appeared in the St Andrews agreement (2006) was dropped from the St Andrews Act, since devolution required this to gain cross-party support. The situation may change since there is likely to be a restructuring of departments and the DCAL Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, is in favour of introducing an Irish Language Bill. DCAL is currently undertaking an audit of activities regarding the implementation of the European Charter. The Language Body consists of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots agency co-funded with the Geaeltracht. The Líofo initiative aims to make 20,000 people fluent in Irish by 2015, and an area in West Belfast has been designated as a Gaeltracht area. The teaching of modern foreign languages is treated separately from the question of Irish and Ulster-Scots, which is highly sensitive politically. In the discussion it was noted that language issues are very much on the political agenda, whilst this is much less true of England.

In the final summary, **Baroness Coussins** highlighted the following points which had emerged from the presentations and the discussion:

- The association of language and culture is essential and what adds value to language learning.
- Languages should be for everyone, yet currently 20% of state schools disapply children from the statutory requirement from age 13. There is a misapprehension that languages are only for the brightest pupils.
- Amongst the structural barriers to the promotion of modern languages are questions of timetabling/blocks; poor transition between primary and secondary schools; assessment issues (in the discussion the lack of reference to the Common European Framework was noted).

- It is vital to talk with the right people – it was striking, for instance, that the UKTI scheme for postgraduates was poorly known by the academics present. Another example is the fact that it is not well known that the Erasmus scheme is open not just to linguists in universities.
- It is important to improve the status of languages and linguists. Whilst there are language bonuses at GCHQ, in the civil service there are not special pay scales for government linguists as there are for government scientists. The self-esteem of bilinguals and community language speakers has to be raised, and they should be encouraged to perceive themselves as linguists. We also need to popularise the importance of languages and linguists, for instance by having a TV champion for languages.
- If languages are considered strategically important and vulnerable, then there needs to be some ring-fencing of funding for this area. Some successful programmes such as Routes into Languages will not be funded in the future.
- England is lagging behind the situation in Scotland and Wales, where there is an active Minister and more coherent strategy. Does the UK need a designated Minister for Language Policy, perhaps situated in the Cabinet Office?