



Response to the Dearing review of language policy

November 2006

Introduction

- 1 The British Academy works to promote the interests of scholarship and research in the humanities and social sciences, and is composed of eminent scholars who are elected to its Fellowship on the basis of their scholarly standing and achievement. As an independent voice for both the humanities and social sciences, the Academy is well placed to comment on how current language policy is affecting the health of these disciplines.
- 2 We are therefore pleased to contribute to Lord Dearing's review. He has been asked by the Education Secretary of State, Alan Johnson, "to see what more can be done to encourage 14-16 year olds to study GCSE or other language courses leading to a recognised qualification."

Summary

- 3 The numbers of students pursuing the study of a foreign language to GCSE have fallen precipitately, especially since the removal of the requirement at Key Stage 4. This presents a major challenge, with the potential severely to undermine the nation's capacity to compete internationally in face of the global challenge, to support research on international topics and to promote social cohesion. The British Academy believes that urgent short-term action is needed – we favour either a return to compulsion at GCSE or at least strong incentives for schools to encourage foreign language study. We also need effective longer-term measures to incentivise foreign language study and to improve teaching and learning opportunities.

Context

- 4 The British Academy welcomes the Dearing review of language policy. We share the Government's concern about the decline in the uptake of foreign languages at GCSE level and beyond, particularly in the maintained sector. We agree with Lord Dearing that urgent action must be taken to address the extreme, and growing, shortage of qualified linguists.
- 5 The decline in pupils taking languages at GCSE level and beyond is having a serious impact: fewer GCSE students of language means fewer students at A-level and degree level, with a potentially disastrous effect on the supply not only of school teachers but also of HE researchers. Secondary schools are letting their language teachers go, or are not filling vacancies as they arise; and an increasing number of language departments at universities and colleges are being closed. When this happens in the sciences, there is a major public outcry. The results damage not only the provision of language-based degrees, but the standard to which many other university subjects in the humanities and social sciences, including history, literature, and many aspects of social and economic inquiry, can be studied, and inflicts consequential damage on the standard of UK research in these fields. The decline in languages also affects the science base, as significant scientific research is conducted and published in languages other than English, and undermines the ability of UK scientists to participate in large-scale international collaborative projects.

- 6 The reasons why it is difficult to encourage pupils to study languages post-14 are complex. They include: the low status of language learning in the UK; the perception that it is harder to obtain good grades in languages than in some other subjects; the perception that they are a “girls’ subject”, which can discourage boys from studying them; the way in which languages are taught in schools; and the global role of English. The difficulty may also result from school policy vis-à-vis examination grades, teacher shortage, and teacher discouragement.
- 7 It should not be assumed that things will improve in the longer-term when all primary pupils have access to language learning at Key Stage 2 (by 2010), because the problems are deep rooted and will take time to address, and will therefore continue to apply even to those pupils who have had some language learning at primary level. This is particularly so if the transition to secondary is not handled effectively, and ensures that pupils can continue a language already studied without marking time while beginners in that language reach their level. Moreover, the “entitlement” at primary level is starting from a low base: a recent study showed that only 3% of primary schools gave all pupils in KS2 a language session of at least 20 minutes at least once a week¹. Since the ‘entitlement’ seems to be no more than a modest opportunity for some language learning in primary schools, it is unlikely that it will provide a substantial foundation for future learning and redress the problems that we currently face.
- 8 The lack of status for languages in this country has been reinforced by the decision to drop these disciplines from the compulsory GCSE curriculum. Pupils are well aware that if an area of study is important, they will be required to do it. The argument for keeping languages optional is that pupils should not be forced to study a subject they do not enjoy. But this argument also applies to the other compulsory subjects within the curriculum. If one follows its logic, there would be no mandatory subjects at Key Stage 4 (KS4). In our view, languages should have the same status as these mandatory subjects. As the Nuffield Inquiry² put it: “languages, by virtue of their direct contribution to economic competitiveness, intercultural tolerance and social cohesion, should have the status of a key skill alongside literacy, numeracy and ICT.”
- 9 Other countries have increased the extent to which school pupils and university students are obliged to study foreign languages. Such measures are seen as necessary in order to equip young people with the skills that they will need in the future. An important factor in the success of other countries’ language learning and teaching has been the development of requirements as well as incentives. They recognise that languages are crucial to their future economic and social well-being and pupils are required to study them.

Recommendations

Return to mandatory requirement

- 10 The Academy urges the Dearing review to look at the lessons that can be drawn from the initiatives of other nations in respect to foreign language study, with a view to reinstating languages as a mandatory subject at Key Stage 4. Compulsion on its own, however, is not sufficient, as demonstrated by the numbers of GCSE pupils from 1998 to 2004 who went on to take up an A level in a foreign language³. Return to a mandatory requirement should therefore be accompanied by a series of other measures and initiatives.

¹ Findings from a study commissioned by the DfES to investigate the extent of primary modern foreign language learning in England and the characteristics of different types of delivery.

² *Languages: the next generation. The final report and recommendations of The Nuffield Languages Inquiry*, Nuffield Foundation, 2000.

³ Findings from: *The health of subjects: evidence from examination entries* by Susannah Wright, Research Officer, University of Oxford 2006. See <http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/documents133-1.pdf>

Other actions

- 11 There is an issue about how language is taught generally in schools, i.e. the changing emphasis on the study of grammar as part of English language teaching. One way to generate curiosity about other languages is to equip students with tools for understanding and analysing their own. Another lesson that can be drawn from Europe is the different approach taken to the study of the native language.
- 12 Incentives and advocacy for language learning are also necessary: pupils and parents are often unaware of the wide range of career opportunities available to those with language competence, or the competitive edge that language capacity gives job candidates in many lines of work. . A recent report⁴ showed that where “the wider school and community are involved in providing positive messages about languages....there is a clear correlation with better take-up.” The British Academy recommends that the Dearing Review should look at ways in which these initiatives can be strengthened.
- 13 Greater emphasis should also be placed on developing educationally sound curricula, some academic, others more vocational. As reported in the Government’s own Strategy for Languages: “OFSTED’s analyses showed that the quality of teaching and pupil achievement in modern foreign languages between the ages of 11 and 14 needs to be raised in comparison with other subjects”. Some schools have been successful in promoting language learning and at raising attainment levels, and we suggest that the Dearing Review should look at the lessons that can be learnt from their example and applied to other schools.
- 14 We need more clearly defined targets at Key Stage 3 (KS3), since the level descriptors in place for modern languages are somewhat vague, making it difficult for language teachers to monitor pupils’ performance and develop effective teaching methods to meet the needs of pupils who find it hard to learn languages. We recommend using the much better descriptors in the Language Ladder which has been developed over the last couple of years⁵.
- 15 Offering a choice of languages and qualifications is an important means of encouraging take-up of languages. The teaching of non-European languages is a growth area, although it has been rather limited to date. Consideration should be given to the ways in which we can develop longer-term strategies that will build on these developments, taking account of the considerable language skills of immigrant families. For example, we understand that schools in the area of the Honda factories have successfully introduced Japanese. In some of the larger cities the study of Arabic or Urdu by non-Asian pupils could make a major contribution to better understanding and the children might well be motivated by the very fact that some of their peers speak these languages naturally.
- 16 The Academy also recommends that the Dearing Review should look into the closely related issue of the recruitment and training of teachers, which is a crucial block at present. Part of the reason may lie in HE provision for language students, which may not do enough to encourage them to consider school teaching as a career.
- 17 However, these steps on their own (i.e. the promotion of language learning/teaching and further attention to innovative curricula and delivery) are insufficient to address the current crisis in languages, because they will take time to reach fruition and will not provide the solution that is needed now. The GCSE requirement is crucial, since otherwise schools will not maintain the complement of staff to teach any languages to a reasonable standard.

⁴ *Language Trends 2006: Languages in Key Stage 4*, CILT (The National Centre for Languages), November 2006.

⁵ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languages/DSP_languagesladder.cfm

Strong incentives

- 18 For these reasons, the Academy's believes that languages should be reinstated as a mandatory subject at KS4. If, however, the Dearing Review concludes that this is not possible, we urge that there should be strong incentives to require secondary schools to meet the targets that the Government in January 2006 asked them to set. These targets reflect the percentage of students studying a language to GCSE. The 2006 survey of language provision and take-up in schools at KS6 shows that the Government's expectation that schools should set a target of between 50% and 90% of pupils studying a language has been largely ignored: "although 73% of maintained schools which responded to the survey are aware of the Government's requirement to set a benchmark...only 17% have done so. In schools where less than a quarter of students study a language at KS4, only 5% have set a benchmark." A school where fewer than 50% of students are pursuing a language to GCSE is not offering a good education.
- 19 It is clear that the majority of schools will only take these benchmarks seriously if they are linked to incentives and sanctions. The British Academy recommends that the Dearing Review should explore with OFSTED the scope for monitoring and enforcing the benchmarks as part of the OFSTED inspection of school performance, with schools with a low take-up automatically attracting the attention of OFSTED. Consideration should also be given to whether the numbers studying languages might attract some form of bonus in the league tables of school performance. This might usefully be linked to the new target of promoting community cohesion, which schools will have to adopt, for which OFSTED will monitor progress.

Next steps

- 20 The British Academy would be happy to discuss any of these issues with the Dearing Review team and to contribute to any further work that is undertaken in this area.

21.11.06

Contact point

Ms Vivienne Hurley
Assistant Secretary (Policy)
The British Academy
10 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

Tel: 020 7969 5200
Fax: 020 7969 5300
email: v.hurley@britac.ac.uk

⁶ *Language Trends 2006*