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The Learning of Foreign Languages: Key Skill or Academic Adornment?

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Introduction

'I want to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to have a language as this will be one of the skills they will need for the new millennium'(David Blunkett in Nuffield, 2000, p. 15)

In its 2000 report, the Nuffield Language Inquiry recommended that foreign languages should be made a key skill. This proposition was endorsed by the government at the time and in 2002, the Department for Education and Skills published its National Language Strategy, which emphasised the need for foreign language competency and intercultural understanding in today's knowledge society (DfES, 2002) and the fact that the UK was unable to contribute fully in the global economy because of shortcomings in its language skills and cultural awareness. In 2004, it was the turn of the Department of Trade and Investment to underline the important role of languages in Britain's economic performance in a White Paper which emphasised the importance of languages and cultural skills for UK trade and investment and for its relationship with its trade partners in Europe and elsewhere. Citing language skills as one of the key areas for development, the White Paper indicated that 20% of small-to-medium enterprises recognised that they had lost business because of a lack of such skills (DTI, 2004).

Yet in other aspects of government policy, as well as in skills surveys and other research into the labour force, knowledge of languages other than English

among the UK workforce is rarely considered to be worth investigating. Foreign language competences, formally acquired within the educational system or informally acquired in the community, are at best perceived as an addendum to other technical skills and other generic, core or key skills which figure prominently in inventories of required skills (Payne, 2004). Although it should not need saying that foreign languages can contribute a great deal in export markets in terms of communication skills, marketing and customer care, they rarely merit more than a passing mention, even in more detailed and specific listings of needs.

How do foreign languages fit into the skills picture? On the one hand, the learning of foreign languages implies the acquisition of directly transferable skills by the integration and mastery of the syntax and vocabulary of another tongue whereby communication with others and a fuller cultural understanding becomes possible. Linguistic skills are essential for some graduate jobs where English is not sufficient in the strictest sense but, looking beyond such positions and the commonly held view that languages can only be used in teaching, translating and interpreting, there are many areas of employment in the UK in which knowledge of a foreign language should be considered to be a 'hard' skill. These range across the media (journalism) and the film industry, tourism and the travel industry (including airlines and hotels), banks and insurance companies, local and national government¹, international non-profit organizations, publishing companies, libraries, defence and diplomacy, representatives in foreign companies, health services and social services, immigration services, schools, universities and colleges ...

Many graduate jobs will not require or may not particularly benefit directly from linguistic skills. Language graduates compete against other graduates without linguistic skills in the job market and although competence in another language may be an advantage, most graduates will have to concentrate on other skills and attributes. However, some of the latter will be inherent in language learning as language learners acquire indirectly transferable skills through dealing with the experience of unfamiliar ideas, concepts and situations and the use of this knowledge in speaking, listening, writing and reading. At best they have a high degree of general literacy, are capable of close and careful analysis of data and are capable of listening and reacting to others in a flexible, open-minded manner. In short, the learning of foreign languages would seem to impart valuable 'soft' skills which are said to be sought after in the workplace. Over 60 per cent of language graduates are employed in one of the following sectors: business services, manufacturing, wholesale / retail or banking / finance². Furthermore, rates of unemployment among language graduates immediately after their degree compare favourably

¹ In this context, it would be interesting to investigate the recruitment drive for more staff with foreign language skills in Whitehall following 9/11 and the ensuing terrorist threats

² Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA), quoted in Nuffield, 2000, p.69

with the national average for graduates and with graduates from other more vocationally oriented subjects such as business administration and media studies.

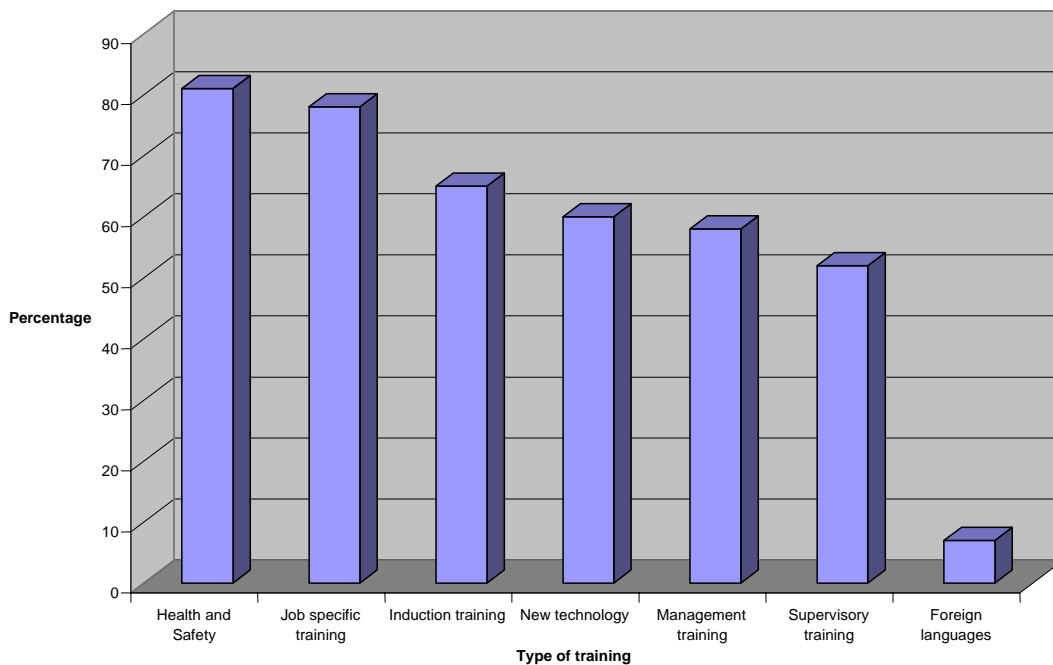
In short, people who can converse and work in more than one language have increased their chance of being employed. However, this has gone largely unnoticed because language competences, like some other skills, have remained undervalued, unrecognised and therefore unrewarded in the workplace. Employees enjoy extra financial rewards for computer skills, professional communication skills, problem solving skills, task variety within a job and team-working skills, but few financial rewards are associated with numerical skills, planning, client communication and horizontal communications skills. In other words, skills that might be of value to employers do not necessarily command a price on the labour market (SEN, 1999c), which makes it even more difficult to assess their actual relevance and importance in business development and competitiveness.

Evidence from the workplace: skills surveys and employers practice

In spite of the potential asset that modern language skills represent both for individuals and for the companies that employ them, there is a surprising lack of interest in them from researchers. Skills surveys rarely mention foreign languages and, when they do, the results do not highlight any particular skill gap in this area in the British workforce (Hall, J. 2000; Questions Answered, 2004). In 1998, a Skills and Enterprise Network survey concluded that employees were insufficiently skilled in managing their own development, problem solving, team working, numeracy, literacy, management, technical and practical skills, general communication, customer handling and computer literacy / knowledge of IT (SENa, 1998). There was no such conclusion concerning foreign language skills. A year later, employers reported skill shortages in the workforce in computer literacy, in customer, communication, practical, management and personal skills, in basic ability, in literacy and in numeracy (SENa, 1999). Again, foreign language competence was not mentioned. In 2000, more than half of employers who reported skill shortages identified the lack of technical and practical skills, computer literacy / knowledge of IT, customer handling and general communication skills. Skills in management, team working, problem solving and managing one's own development were also found wanting, as were literacy and numeracy skills for a fifth of employers. Once more, foreign languages did not appear as a prominent feature (SEN, 2000).

The pattern of training offered by employers - which has been stable throughout the 1990s - is consistent with the low priority given to foreign language competences (see graph).

Graph 1: Types of training in percentage offered by employers



Source: SEN, 2000

It would be simplistic to conclude from this that foreign language skills must be of little importance in terms of potential business development in the UK. It might be said to illustrate a failure of British employers to realise the potential of foreign language competences in their workforce. With the internationalisation of markets and with the European Union's largest growth sectors being business services (where over a quarter of language graduates are employed³), health care, education, recreational activities and hotels and restaurants, foreign language skills are becoming more important for a growing number of staff. For sales and marketing people working in international teams, both language skills and cross-cultural knowledge are becoming increasingly vital (SEN, 1998b; SEN, 1999b). More importantly, as stated in the Nuffield Language Inquiry: 'Often a vicious circle develops whereby SMEs do not export because they do not have the language skills and they do not invest in language training because they do not export'⁴. This suggests that greater insight into the benefits of the use and development of linguistic skills may be gained from 'those who do', that it to say from employers and companies that do value and make use of these skills rather than from 'those who don't', that is to say from employers and companies who fail to realise the potential of

³ HESA, quoted in Nuffield, p.69

⁴ Nuffield p.21

language skills. For this purpose we will use examples from British exporting companies and from inward-investing companies.

Foreign language skills and export performance

In 1999, a survey carried out by the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC, 1999) showed that although a large majority of UK exporters did sell to non-English speaking countries (83%) and although sales abroad represented 34% of small exporters' turnover, more than one third (34%) of these small exporters never used the buyer's language, only 4% always used the buyer's language and more than half (51%) used the buyer's language sometimes. On the other hand, 34% of exporting firms had used the services of an interpreter and 41% those of a translator. More than half of small exporters (52%) thought that their export

Table: Behavioural characteristics of exporters

	Anglocentrics	Opportunists	Adaptors	Enablers⁵
Target Markets	Old British empire/ English speaking countries	English and foreign language speaking countries	English and foreign language speaking countries	English and foreign language speaking countries
Attitude to languages	Non-English speaking countries not targeted markets.	Little consideration of cultural and linguistic difficulties.	Recognise importance of language to gain businesses	Localise products, services and literature.
Languages strategy.	None	Depend on overseas customers with English speaking representative	Adapt literature/ website to promote trade, but depend on overseas customers with English speaking representative	English-speaking staff in overseas countries. Few with language skills to deal directly with customers.
Perceived impact on business of lack of foreign language competence.	No loss perceived.	Recognise that opportunities are lost.	Recognise that opportunities are lost.	Impact on businesses minimised

⁵ In general 'enablers' are more highly qualified, but graduate 'enablers' are more likely to have achieved at least a GCSE/O-Level in a foreign language.

performance would largely benefit from the employment of a linguist. This illustrates the fact that many British businesses are reactive rather than proactive when making use of language skills and that even if a need is perceived this doesn't translate into more training in language skills being offered.

A recent survey of 1,000 exporters commissioned by the British Chambers of Commerce (Sidnick, 2004) suggests that poor language skills and a lack of cultural understanding of overseas markets may be stunting UK growth. The survey grouped exporters according to their attitudes to languages and international business - as anglocentrics, opportunists, adaptors and enablers (see Table).

In keeping with previous results, 31% of the survey sample places the least value on languages whilst 25% place the highest value on foreign language skills within their business. Many exporters communicate only in English and do not seek to adapt and localise their company's offering to individual foreign markets. 63% have no strategy to develop language skills, even though 77 per cent admit to having lost export sales over the past two years. However, the survey uncovers a connection between the value exporters place on language skills within their business and their annual turnover: those companies that place the greatest value on language skills tend to enjoy higher annual turnover. Among businesses which placed the least value on language skills, only one third had an annual export turnover above £0.5m whereas 77% of businesses placing the highest value on language skills had an annual export turnover above £0.5m. Moreover, export sales of firms that valued language skills the least were found to have declined by £50,000 in the previous year whereas those of firms placing the highest value on language skills had increased by £290,000 on average during the same period.

It is perhaps in this context that we can add some of the more striking figures from various recent surveys of exporting companies quoted by John Hall for the Scottish Council for Research in Education. 60 % of 200 exporters (60% of which had won Queen's Awards for Exports) surveyed by the BETRO Trust (1979) thought language ability was a considerable advantage for their salesmen. The general conclusion of the survey was an apparent link between foreign languages and success in exports. Unpublished DTI reports suggest that 21% of exporters have faced a language barrier at some time, a figure which is corroborated by Metcalf (1991). 19% of exporters consider that they have faced cultural barriers and 22% feel that there is a need for an increase in language skills. Webber (1997) quotes a 1994 survey of Scottish employers in which 74% believed foreign languages were 'essential' or 'very important'. Lastly, Duncan and Johnstone (1989) found in their survey of 176 Scottish companies with foreign language markets that '25% had used language competence as a criterion for employment' in the previous year and that '33% believed that languages should be more fully integrated with the teaching of technical and commercial subjects'. Despite other statistics which unsurprisingly confirm both

English as the most important language in world business and the primacy of technical specification over linguistic medium, there is clearly an important role for languages. This was also the main conclusion of the Nuffield Language Inquiry (2000). As we have seen, few British exporters seem to be aware of this.

Foreign language skills and inward investment

It is becoming clear that the requirement for linguistic skills in the workforce can influence where companies choose to locate their premises, impacting on regional and national economies. This type of competition takes place at international and inter-regional levels. It is not rare when inward investment agencies are asked by prospecting businesses assessing locations for their activities to provide figures of foreign language competencies available in their area. This emphasises the need for the workforce in a region (or a country) to possess these kinds of skills and also makes it increasingly necessary to gather information on the matter. This is implicit in the recent creation of the business-led Regional Language Networks project -initiated and supported by the DfES. This project is designed to help ensure that the future provision of language and cultural skills meets the needs of businesses involved in international trade.

While English is the most important language for jobs which have an international component, it does not follow that monolingual English speakers are the best positioned individuals in the job market. Using the growth of call centre operations as a case study we can perhaps sketch a more general picture of the possible impact of language skills on employment in the UK. As host to over 5,000 call centres, the UK has the greatest concentration of telephone call centres in Europe (including in-house services). This is due to a considerable degree to the development of the telecommunications industry and to the business environment, but available expertise and skills, including foreign languages skills, have also played a role. International companies seek both English language and foreign language competencies when setting up call centres⁶. London First, the organisation responsible for attracting inward investment to the capital, has argued that it is partly because employers can find multilingual skills in the capital that they choose to locate there. In London alone there are close to 300 spoken languages and an increasing international mix within the labour force. On the other hand, IBM UK Ltd encountered difficulties when they decided to locate their international technical support call centre in Greenock, Scotland. The company had to hire most of the workforce from overseas, not so much because of a lack of technical skills in the local community as because of a lack of foreign language skills. Similarly, when Gateway computers decided to set up an 800-strong call

⁶ For example, the West London centre of Delta Airlines handles 1.2 million calls a year...in 10 languages.

centre in Dublin the lack of foreign language skills available locally meant that one third of vacancies had to be filled from abroad.

Skills gap in foreign language: the government response

An increasing number of private companies operating in the UK need foreign language skills among their workforce to develop their business, yet they have acted upon this skill need in opportunistic or ad-hoc fashion. What of the role of the public authorities in attempting to develop a country-wide strategy to encourage the wider availability of language skills?

On the eve of the creation of the euro zone, a report from the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities (1998) recommended that the teaching of foreign languages should be more actively encouraged by the British government, in particular in primary schools and at university level. The report also called for a pro-active government strategy to encourage UK students to spend more time studying abroad, in particular via the EU Erasmus-Socrates student exchange programmes. This advice has gone largely unheeded and today the lack of language skills among British students means that there is a growing imbalance in the flow of pupils and students within the EU. Britain is losing out on European mutual agreements and subsidies both financially and culturally because of the worsening imbalance in student exchanges between the UK and the rest of the EU. An increasing number of EU students are coming to the UK while the number of British students going to other EU countries has fallen dramatically. Meanwhile, the European Union single market, the drive towards the harmonisation of European diplomas such as the Bologna process for higher education or the Lisbon process for vocational education and the mutual and automatic recognition of skills certification and professional qualifications which is on the agenda at EU level are all developments which are bound to include a foreign language element.

In 2000, the conclusions of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry were even more unequivocal: monolingualism and a chronic shortage of people with usable language skills at all levels leave the UK vulnerable and dependent on the linguistic competence and goodwill of others. With companies increasingly looking for personnel with technical or professional skills plus another language, young British people are said to be increasingly at a disadvantage in the job market as companies revert to recruiting native speakers of other languages. The range of languages and level of competences provided by the education system were found to be insufficient due to curricular, financial and staffing pressures. The report denounced the incoherence of the government approach to languages, described as a patchwork of often unrelated initiatives, with investments in one sector rarely exploited in another and no identifiable path of learning from primary school to university and beyond. Indeed, aspects of the entire education system were blamed for these poor performances: 1) the lack of provision for the learning of foreign languages in early childhood in

spite of research showing that an early start to language learning enhances literacy, citizenship and intercultural tolerance; 2) the lack of motivation or direction of pupils at secondary level with many leaving school without an adequate level of operational competence; 3) the insufficiently broad provision for 16-19 year olds, with 90 per cent of 16-year-olds choosing not to carry on learning languages when faced with the harsh choice between specialising in languages or giving them up; 4) the closure of university language departments with funding and management structures rewarding specialisation and traditional areas of research; 5) the impoverished and incoherent language provision for adults in spite of the government's recognition of the importance of lifelong learning; 6) the acute shortage of language teachers which has damaged the quality of provision in schools and colleges and has created a vicious circle of inadequate supply.

The recommendations of the report were wide-ranging. Most importantly, a national strategy was required. Language learning would start at the age of seven and languages would be designated a key skill alongside literacy, numeracy and technology. More languages would be taught in secondary schools with the use of IT. Languages should become a specified component of the 16-19 curriculum and a requirement for university entrance and all university students would be entitled to learn a language as part of their degree course. Lifelong language learning would be developed for adults. Short-term measures would be implemented to attract more language teachers and a national standards framework for describing and accrediting language competence would be setup.

Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the findings and recommendations of the Nuffield report have gone largely unheeded by the government. Its 2003 White Paper stated the importance of linking its national skills strategy with the challenge of skills and mobility across the European Union (DfES, 2003), in particular within the single currency area (HM Treasury, 2003). However, it failed to recognise the importance of foreign language skills as a particular area where a gap needed to be plugged and was satisfied to announce in the same document 'a new entitlement to learn languages throughout Key Stage 2, recognition of the importance of language skills for business and increased employability for individuals' (p.126). Since 2003/2004, the study of languages has been introduced at an earlier stage of schooling (aged 7) but has become optional from the age of 14. As a result, language learning and teaching at the upper secondary and higher level is already faltering even further. Ironically, it is the move towards a more diverse curriculum for 14-19 year olds that has left only a third of schools requiring students to learn a language in Key Stage 4, down from 57% within a year (National Centre for Languages, 2004). State schools have been freeing up the curriculum to include designated subjects, losing sight in the process of the vocational relevance of languages in today's world. The small number of languages specialist schools cannot be expected to

reverse the trend in the near future. With choice remaining a key word in the government's education strategy, the final report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform has recommended that the languages entitlement at KS4 be extended to 16-19 year olds (Tomlinson, 2004). Government policy concerning the teaching and learning of foreign languages is inconsistent and a Janus-faced issue. When it comes to recognising the current and future importance of foreign languages for Britain and the British people in Europe and outside Europe, many well-meaning words are being spoken and written. But when it comes to acting upon the widening gap between this vision and the current dearth of foreign language skills and knowledge of foreign cultures, the same government is shying away from taking any radical measures to stem the decline and is shifting this responsibility on to other stakeholders.

Conclusion

'Just as IT skills were not perceived as core a decade ago, there is a similar perception of modern language skills today' (CBI, quoted in Nuffield p.64)

Surveys of the labour market do not suggest that there is a widespread demand from employers for foreign language skills in the workforce. This explains why foreign language training does not figure largely in the training offered by employers and why foreign language skills do not figure largely in skills surveys. However, as this paper suggests, this picture of existing perceptions, practice and provision does not tell the whole story and it is difficult to measure and anticipate the losses - in export markets, inward investment and EU cooperation - incurred by the lagging perceived demand for language skills.

This paper also aims to highlight the fundamental contradictions which lie at the heart of the current policy concerning the teaching and learning of modern languages in Britain. Carrots are being used to entice stakeholders (parents, schools, businesses) into developing the foreign language skill base of the country where arguably a stick (i.e. compulsory learning enshrined in the qualification process as recommended in the Nuffield Report) could be a more appropriate way of achieving this objective in the long term.

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