



Languages: the next generation

Executive Summary

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1. Overview

The Nuffield Languages Inquiry (1998-2000) was established to review the UK's capability in languages. It was asked to consider the following questions and to make recommendations:

- What capability in languages will the UK need in the next twenty years if it is to fulfil its economic, strategic, social and cultural aims and responsibilities, and the aspirations of its citizens?
- To what extent do present policies and arrangements meet these needs?
- What strategic planning and initiatives will be required in the light of the present position?

To scope the task and identify major issues before the Inquiry started to take evidence, a consultative report, *Where are we going with languages?* was produced in 1998.

Specialist consultants then advised the Inquiry, and written evidence was received from a wide range of individuals and organisations.

In addition, major surveys were carried out by NIACE and FEDA and around a thousand contributions were emailed to the Nuffield Inquiry Online over an eight-week period from October to December 1998.

To ensure a balance of evidence from employers, education and the general public, the Inquiry commissioned an intensive programme of interviews with individual employers in the private and public sectors.

In May 2000, the Inquiry published its final report *Languages: the next generation*.

2. Members of the Inquiry

The Inquiry's work was carried out by a committee of ten members, appointed by the Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation and drawn in equal numbers from languages education and the business world. The committee was chaired by Sir Trevor McDonald and Sir John Boyd.

- **Sir Trevor McDonald OBE** (Chairman), ITN journalist and newscaster
- **Sir John Boyd KCMG** (Chairman), Master of Churchill College, Cambridge
- **Alan Moys** (Secretary), former Director of CILT
- **Sir Leonard Appleyard KCMG**, Vice-Chairman of Barclays Capital
- **Rosemary Calthorpe**, Manager for Marks & Spencer plc
- **Professor Glynn Cochrane**, Group Adviser for Community Relations, Rio Tinto
- **Peter Downes OBE**, consultant and former President of ALL
- **Professor Michael Kelly**, Professor of French, University of Southampton
- **Alwena Lamping**, freelance author, editor and consultant
- **Frank Pignatelli**, Chief Executive of the Scottish University for Industry
- **Dr Jessica Rawson CBE**, Warden of Merton College, Oxford
- **Kathy Wicksteed**, Language College Adviser, Technology Colleges Trust
- **Hugh Morgan Williams**, Chairman, Canford Group and Chair, Languages National Training Organisation

3. Foreword by Sir Trevor McDonald and Sir John Boyd

'Our mandate from the Nuffield Foundation, to look at the UK's capability in languages and to report on what we need to do as a nation to improve it, was timely. Every day we are confronted by evidence that we live in a shrinking world. The breaking down of international barriers, a process which will move much further and faster in the course of this new century, has placed a premium on our ability to talk to our neighbours in the global village.

The UK has no automatic monopoly on political or economic success. In a world of alliances and partnerships we need to understand where others are coming from. In a competitive world we cannot afford to be without strong and complete skills: no skills - no jobs. The need to strengthen our children's literacy, numeracy and technology skills is clear and we support it. Side by side with these should go the ability to communicate across cultures. It, too, is a key skill.

There is, however, a challenge here. The situation is greatly complicated by the global role of English, now essentially the language of international science, aviation, banking, technology and much else. Our partners, whether in Europe or East Asia, have moved fast to recognise this. A dry analysis might say that we could rest on that. But, in a complex and disparate world in which modern communications have transformed personal contact across boundaries, is English really enough?

In our view it is not. Capability in other languages - a much broader range than hitherto and in greater depth - is crucially important for a flourishing UK. The scale of what needs to be done has become ever more striking as our work has gone on. At the moment, by any reliable measure we are doing badly. We talk about communication but don't always communicate. There is enthusiasm for languages but it is patchy. Educational provision is fragmented, achievement poorly measured, continuity not very evident. In the language of our time, there is a lack of joined-up thinking. The UK needs a change of policy and practice to fit us for the new millennium. We want to see language skills built into the culture and practice of British business. One way or another we must give our children a better start with languages and equip them to go on learning them through life. We need to aim higher and deliver better.

In practical terms, this demands a coherent national languages strategy, reflected (and earning its place) in our changing educational curriculum and driven with determination. Things may not be good and it may not be possible to put them right immediately but we hope to have launched a process. We can and must do better. The potential is there - there are excellent initiatives on which to draw and build, achievements to be developed and rewarded. Technology opens an extraordinary range of new possibilities. Both of us emerge with renewed respect for those who have committed themselves to excellence in language and with a desire to see higher standards yet.

A new and frank view is needed, and we have tried to be rigorous in focusing on the issues that matter, drawing on a wide range of evidence and listening carefully. Not all our recommendations will be welcome but we expect them to be examined seriously.'

4. Main findings

The Inquiry's main findings are:

- **English is not enough**
We are fortunate to speak a global language but, in a smart and competitive world, exclusive reliance on English leaves the UK vulnerable and dependent on the linguistic competence and the goodwill of others.
- **People are looking for leadership to improve the nation's capability in language**
Attitudes have become markedly more positive in recent years, and languages are now seen as much more important, especially among young professionals.
- **Young people from the UK are at a disadvantage in the recruitment market**
The UK workforce suffers from a chronic shortage of people at all levels with usable language skills. Companies increasingly need personnel with technical or professional skills plus another language, and often their only option is to recruit native speakers of other languages. Mobility of employment is in danger of becoming the preserve of people from other countries.
- **The UK needs competence in many languages - not just French - but the education system is not geared up to achieve this**
Schools and colleges do not provide an adequate range of languages and levels of competence for the future. Curricular, financial and staffing pressures mean that we teach a narrowing range of languages, at a time when we should be doing the opposite.
- **Government has no coherent approach to languages**
There are many positive developments relating to languages in education and other areas of government, but the scene remains a patchwork of often unrelated initiatives. There is no rational path of learning from primary school to university and beyond, and investments in one sector are rarely exploited in another.
- **In spite of parental demand, there is still no UK-wide agenda for children to start languages early**
There is a widespread public perception, backed by research, that learning another language needs to start earlier if the next generation is to achieve higher standards. An early start to language learning also enhances literacy, citizenship and intercultural tolerance.
- **Secondary school pupils lack motivation or direction**
While more pupils now learn a language to age 16 than ever before, too few leave school with an adequate level of operational competence. Current provision does not motivate and too many pupils, also lacking positive messages about languages from outside the classroom, see language learning as irrelevant.
- **Nine out of ten children stop learning languages at 16**
The current provision for 16-19 year olds is not broad enough to keep pace with individual or national needs. Young people are faced with the harsh choice at 16 between specialising in languages or giving them up. Moves to broaden the post-16 curriculum are welcome but more radical changes are needed.
- **University language departments are closing, leaving the sector in deep crisis**
Higher Education is trying to run an ambitious 21st century programme for languages

but is hamstrung by outdated funding and management structures which mainly reward specialism and traditional areas of research. Provision is uncoordinated nationally with little regard for long-term consequences.

- **Adults are keen to learn languages but are badly served by an impoverished system**

The government's recent recognition of the importance of lifelong learning is timely. The absence of coherence in the current language provision for adults, together with a hostile funding regime, has led to decline in what should be a key sector.

- **The UK desperately needs more language teachers**

The shortage of teachers, which is now acute and damaging the quality of provision in schools and colleges, is creating a vicious circle of inadequate supply. Meanwhile, university departments which train language teachers are threatened with closure.

5. Recommendations

In its final report, the inquiry made the following recommendations:

- **Designate languages a key skill**
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.
- **Drive forward a national strategy**
The government should establish a national strategy for developing capability in languages in the UK and a system capable of supporting such a strategy.
- **Appoint a languages supremo**
The task would be to work at the highest level with government departments, national agencies, employers and the general public to ensure successful implementation of the national strategy for languages. To be effective, the supremo should be attached to the Cabinet Office and have direct access to the Prime Minister.
- **Raise the profile of languages**
The government should arrange for a sustained campaign to promote positive attitudes towards languages, raise awareness of their potential and foster a culture where using more than one language is seen as an attainable goal for the majority.
- **Give young children a flying start**
The government should declare a firm commitment to early language learning for all children and invest in the long-term policies necessary for pupils to learn a new language from age 7. To spearhead this commitment, it should fund international primary schools and introduce Language Awareness into the National Literacy Strategy.
- **Improve arrangements in secondary schools**
Language learning in the secondary school sector should be uprated to provide a wider range of languages, a more flexible menu to cater better for different needs, abilities and interests, and more use of information technology. All pupils should leave secondary education equipped with foundation language skills, grammatical understanding and the skills for further learning in later life.
- **Make languages a specified component of the 16-19 curriculum**
A language should be a requirement for university entry and for designated vocational qualifications. For the majority in the 16-19 age group who do not wish to specialise in languages there should be a range of attractive courses to extend existing language skills or acquire new languages. There is scope to incorporate these in the Key Skills initiative.
- **Reform the organisation and funding of languages in higher education**
A national agenda for languages in higher education should be agreed as a matter of urgency to ensure a sufficient supply of language specialists nationally and the entitlement of all students to learn a language as part of their degree course.

Development should be a planned and managed process with full regard for national language needs.

- **Develop the huge potential of language learning in adult life**

The government should take strategic responsibility for lifelong language learning in order to ensure the investment, collaboration and consultation needed to respond to the demand and drive up standards.

- **Break out of the vicious circle of inadequate teacher supply**

The minister responsible for the recruitment of teachers should implement a series of radical short-term measures to attract more language teachers, alongside the long-term solution of making post-16 language study a requirement for entry to higher education and therefore to initial teacher training.

- **Establish a national standards framework for describing and accrediting language competence**

The framework should embrace the Council of Europe Framework and existing UK qualifications both in education and the world of employment. It should be clear, transparent and couched in terms which are intelligible to non-specialist users.

- **Co-ordinate initiatives linking technology and languages**

The national strategy for languages should support and co-ordinate existing pioneering ICT initiatives and ensure that the potential of new technologies is fully exploited in language teaching and learning.