

To the acting National Director for Languages

From the Steering Group of the Nuffield Languages Programme

March 2003

We issued a general response to the National Languages Strategy shortly after its publication in December 2002. At the time, we indicated that we would offer a more detailed commentary in due course, and your appointment as acting National Director for Languages would seem a fitting occasion for doing so.

We welcome the Government's unequivocal statement that language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras in the 21st century and that it is time for action to address the long standing issue of improving the nation's capability in languages.

Our purpose in writing this letter is to contribute to the success of the Strategy and further its goal of bringing about real change in national attitudes towards languages. We note that no firm plans have as yet been published for implementing key aspirations of the Strategy, and we hope that the observations and suggestions that follow will assist in the process.

Responsibility and leadership

The Strategy aims to create an appetite for learning languages, to motivate people of all ages to learn. The key partners who are expected to play their part in building success will need clear leadership and direction, not least because the aspirations of the Strategy are undermined by elements of the Strategy itself, such as the reduced status of languages in the post-14 curriculum. In this context, the appointment of a National Director for languages is a real opportunity for change.

It is crucial that the Director's brief should extend beyond education. The detailed terms of reference for the role should ensure that languages are given consideration in the development of key policies across government. There should be a requirement for the Director to operate closely with, at least, the Cabinet Office, the FCO and the DTI. They in turn should be able to use the Director as their link for input into decision-making relating to languages education.

Outside government, cooperation with business and employers' organisations will be important, and the terms of reference should emphasise the employment as well as the educational issues. This has been a constant theme in the Nuffield Foundation's work on languages and we believe that it is of growing rather than receding importance. Language learning is increasingly important for employment, mobility and advancement, and for securing better access to employment throughout the EU for UK citizens.

Within the DfES, the Director's terms of reference should ensure coordination of the various sections that have responsibilities for languages, to bring about coherence and a better balance than has been achieved hitherto between coverage of the 7-14 schools curriculum and of post-14 education, HE and lifelong learning, which receive only scant attention in the Strategy.

The Director should be an active ambassador for languages, with a brief to raise the profile within and outside the educational world. There is a particular need in an Anglophone country to invest in the promotion of the languages message to an audience that is all too easily persuaded that English is enough. We cannot stress too strongly the need for this strand to be developed alongside the enhancement of provision.

The role of Director will, of course, need to link closely with that of the National Centre for Languages formed from the merger of CILT and the LNTD, and we assume that the terms of reference for the two will be concluded together.

Resources

The level of resourcing allocated to the Strategy will affect progress at all levels. The £10m indicated in the document, largely made up of funds allocated to existing initiatives, is not by itself going to make a long-term difference and is in danger of being interpreted as a lack of serious commitment. Having come this far towards a changed national culture, it would be negligent to see policies fail simply because they are under-resourced. It goes without saying that, in addition to access to decision-making structures, the Director will require appropriate resources. So too will the National Centre for Languages if it is to carry out successfully the role outlined for it.

Early Language Learning

Placing primary languages at the centre of the Strategy is an important first step but, if primary languages are to succeed, a firmer commitment than is evident in the Strategy document will be needed.

It is essential that the government clarify further what is meant by providing an "entitlement" for all children from age 7. It has to mean that children from all backgrounds should have real and sustained opportunities to learn a language as part of their normal curriculum. Anything short of this will lead to serious inequalities.

This will need a staged approach, and therefore it is especially important to have a timetable and to monitor progress. Comprehensive procedures are needed, to ensure equal opportunity and to monitor progress towards the declared goal of offering all 7 year olds a real opportunity to learn a language by 2012. These might include, for example, targets for a certain number of schools to have a Language Co-ordinator by several interim stages.

Another area which will demand systematic monitoring is the transition from KS2 to KS3. This is a critical factor in the success of primary languages. We assume that the experience of other countries is being scrutinised and that lessons have been learnt from earlier attempts to introduce languages to primary schools in England. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the 1960s.

We recognise that, if plans for primary languages are to go ahead on a reasonable time scale, not all teaching can be provided by fully qualified teachers. Teachers and language assistants will have to be recruited from a variety of backgrounds by a variety of means. The key will be to ensure high-quality training and accreditation, and we look forward to hearing further details.

Leadership will be required on the choice and range of languages to be offered within our primary schools and beyond. While in purely logistical terms it is tempting to equate 'primary languages' with 'primary French', the dangers of acting on this basis are well documented. The need for our national capability to extend to a wide range of languages should be reflected in a widening range of opportunities in the school system, and the primary sector's role in this process needs to be spelled out and resourced.

Key Stage 3

The drive to improve standards at KS3 by the introduction of a new language teaching/learning framework is to be welcomed. However, it is more than likely that we shall witness a negative backlash on this age group because optionality has been introduced at KS4. We are concerned at the possibility of a situation developing where the reasons given by the Government for making languages optional at KS4 are reproduced at KS3. It will be necessary to monitor closely what is happening if we are to avoid, among other things, narrowing the range of languages offered in secondary schools at a time when we should be doing the opposite. Ofsted could play a key role in monitoring the situation.

14-19

You will know from our initial response to the Strategy that we deplore the decision to make languages optional at age 14. It undermines the coherence of the Strategy. It means that, at best, the generation of pupils now at primary and secondary schools will have severely reduced rather than increased experience of language learning. It also makes the task of convincing young people that languages are important all the more difficult.

The notion of an 'entitlement' at this stage raises many questions. What directives will be given to schools to ensure that the entitlement is more than a token? How will they be 'encouraged' to explore the various options open to them? What plans are there for systematic monitoring of take-up among this

age group and of the impact on the overall diversity of languages taught, motivation at KS3, HE, teacher supply, teacher retention?

There is scope for imaginative solutions to post-14 language learning, other than simply allowing opting out. Voices within the languages field have long argued for a more flexible approach to choice of language for study beyond 14, which would allow young people to opt to learn a new language rather than necessarily continue with the one learned at KS3.

A strategic approach to languages means, by definition, ensuring that they are given full consideration in wider policy development. The Government's investigation into the feasibility of an English Baccalaureate could present excellent opportunities in the longer term, since the breadth implicit in a baccalaureate must surely include language learning. On this issue we developed a closely argued and achievable vision for 14-19 languages in our response to the Green Paper. We trust you will consider our arguments.

Recognition system

The introduction of a new system for recognising achievement in language learning has great promise. If high national status can be assured for it, it could play a major role in a baccalaureate system and in achieving a greater diversity of languages learned at all ages. It also offers opportunities for promoting language learning in a wide range of contexts. The key to success will be to resource the development of the new system realistically, to ensure consultation at the right level throughout the development process and to set the right pace for the introduction of the scheme that is eventually produced.

Languages beyond school

The Strategy has little to say about languages in Further, Higher and Adult Education. Plans are sketchy, and we can only suppose that the National Director will have the remit of developing policies in partnership with key organisations such as HEFCE and the Learning & Skills Council.

The Nuffield Languages Programme has recently (February 2003) published a report on the far-reaching changes in the languages provision in Higher Education. These changes have clear implications for schools and colleges since they affect the decisions being made by young people. Conversely, the changing face of the 14-19 languages provision will affect the courses and training offered by the universities. The success of the Strategy will depend on what happens at these stages of education; changes in both will have profound long-term effects, not least on the future supply of language teachers. The publication of our report will, we hope, be a useful contribution to the debate.

Language learning in Further and Adult Education has been neglected for decades. We therefore hope that plans for these sectors will be inclusive, involving wide-ranging consultation and doing more than tinkering at the edges of existing provision. Collaboration between local Learning and Skills

Councils and LEAs is potentially a useful step forward. However, guidance at national level will be needed since, in many parts of the country, the infrastructure for language learning has all but disappeared in these sectors.

Regional Networks

One area of the Strategy where proposals are comprehensive is that of working with employers, developed by the LNTD in their proposal for Regional Language Networks. We find it surprising that the Business Champion scheme is given little recognition, but hope that this is due to an oversight and that there will be continuing support to develop this area of work.

The Regional Networks also have strategic potential beyond the world of languages for business. Their impact on the wider aims of the Strategy could be enhanced if they were extended to offer a platform for collaboration between local schools, Further and Adult Education Colleges and Higher Education Institutions.

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