

ITT MFL

on-line support for teacher education in languages

Uptake of Languages at Key Stage 4

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University of Sheffield PGCE 2007-2008

interactive seminar series: trainee research

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in association with the
Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA)

Publishing imprint: ITT MFL

Series (topic): interactive seminar ('Optionality')

Article first published on-line 2009

ITT MFL print ref: on-line i-sem 02

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This on-line research paper has been approved for publication by the ITT MFL Editorial Board

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Introduction

Full English breakfast in Mallorca? Coronation Street omnibus in Sicily? Perhaps fish and chips on the Rhein? While we may painfully cringe at the stereotypes of 'Brits abroad', ignorantly inflicting their culture and traditions upon the rest of the world, we cannot deny that the English language continues to dominate world communication. While past school syllabi ensured that pupils were subjected to at least two hours of mandatory modern foreign language learning with the hope of introducing them to other possible worlds, rich with deep-rooted and inevitably intriguing culture, recent government policy has empowered pupils with the choice of whether they would like to continue or discontinue their study of a modern foreign language at the end of Key Stage 3. The consequences are undeniable. Although the legislation was intended to allow pupils to make an informed and sensible choice regarding their Key Stage 4 study programme, the ramifications have been the closure of departments, a reduction in the number of pupils going on to study a modern foreign language at Key Stage 4 and beyond, and a general stigma with regard to the importance and role of modern foreign languages within education.

As linguists, we were very keen to explore the aspects which have contributed to the general degradation of modern foreign language study nationwide, and the strategies and individual school policies that have been put into place in order to combat this universal and disconcerting phenomenon. In order to provide ourselves with a clear focus, we decided to conduct our study in two groups. One of the groups focused on pupils with the fundamental intention of finding out why pupils chose to either continue or discontinue further study of a modern foreign language, the extent to which they felt further study would benefit them, and the various factors the pupils felt influenced their decision making. The group conducted eight semi-structured interviews from a majority of the schools that took part in the inquiry, as they felt that the nature of this type of interview allowed ideas to circulate more effectively. Furthermore, it was also felt that the interviews allowed for more honesty from the pupils and how they felt language learning could be improved. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the group also based their findings and summations in key literature surrounding

the role of pupils and their attitudes towards modern foreign language learning.

The other group focussed on the roles of the schools and the numerous ways in which they were attempting to resolve the issue of poor uptake at Key Stage 4. The group conducted an interview with all the Heads of Department from the schools that took part in the inquiry, and recorded aspects of both positive and potentially negative practice that existed within the departments. Among the aspects focussed on were exchanges and trips, use of authentic materials and language assistants, languages days and parental influence. After both sections of the report we have offered possible solutions and recommendations, and consolidate our findings in our final conclusion.

What are schools doing in order to increase uptake of languages at Key Stage 4?

In an age in which modern technology dominates our lives, affecting numerous industries from travel and tourism to business and commerce, it is perhaps not surprising that English has become the world's *lingua franca*, arguably to the detriment of other languages, which in spite of their rich cultures and traditions fail to contend with the English language and its economic and universal appeal. Nowhere is this scenario more striking than in our secondary schools, in which modern foreign language learning is stigmatised and met with *blasé* and indifferent apathy from pupils nationwide. Decreasing figures of those opting to further their study of a modern foreign language at Key Stage 4 and beyond are testament to the worrying, yet indubitable fact that language learning is quite simply not on today's pupils' agenda. Arguably this begs the question of the strategies and schemata that language departments throughout the country are putting into place in order to both survive and appeal to a generation that fundamentally fails to appreciate the benefits and advantages of further language study. In face of apparent damaging government policy, which allows pupils to discontinue their study of modern foreign languages, coupled with general ignorance throughout society *vis-à-vis* foreign cultures and traditions, we would now like to investigate how four individual schools are implementing a variety of strategies in order to combat this dilemma. Following our investigation into the following schools' practice, we would like to consolidate this information with a number of possible recommendations.

In order to give our investigation concise focus, we decided to found our research in the following questions, which we retrieved from an article pertaining to the phenomenon of language 'optionality' at Key Stage 4.

“The role of marketing and promotions in encouraging take-up of Languages at key stage 4

How assertive are Languages departments in making the case for Languages at key stage 4 in their schools?

What models of promotional activity have been seen to favourably influence the take-up of Languages at key stage 4 in schools?

To what extent are Languages staff able to schedule and execute promotional activity to bring about the take-up of Languages at key stage 4 in schools?" (*Optionality' and the Language Trends*, n.d.)

Although these are not the exact questions we asked during our interviews with the four case study schools, they were used as a guide in order to formulate our own questions into what schools and particularly MFL departments are doing to encourage take-up of languages at Key Stage 4 and beyond.

Case Study A

The first school visited has an intake of pupils who are primarily from farming communities. One of the first things to note with reference to this department is the poor accommodation, which seems to have a negative effect on the teaching and learning of languages. The MFL department is divided between three buildings making communication between members of the department difficult and frustrating. The Head of Department believes this to be one of the most significant reasons for the poor provision of languages at this school. Another worrying factor is that targets are made and simply forgotten about: for example, the target for uptake of languages at Key Stage 4 is 50% and the department is currently working at 40%. Gaining an increase of 10% is an achievable target for a department such as this, however as can be seen later, there is very little being done to reach the 50% mark. There are schools with a lower percentage:

“At one school, the proportion of 14-year-olds dropping subjects like French and German altogether rose from 40% to 90% in just a year, according to CiLT, the National Centre for Languages, which advises ministers.” (*Schools 'damaging' language teaching*, Nov 17 2003)

However, even though worse statistics exist around the country, the Head of Department at this school knows that due to the location and status of their school they should be achieving better statistics.

Nevertheless, there are initiatives in place to try to rectify this issue. From year 8 onwards, the teachers try to build in to their planning ways in which to show the benefits of taking languages further. For example, high-ability pupils in year 8 are shown a video which highlights the advantages of learning languages, and the class follows this with a lively discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of language learning. Another idea, which appears to be fruitful, is the introduction of pen friends from year 8. The pupils feel success in being able to communicate with pupils in other countries and they eagerly await their letters.

The majority of pressure, however, seems to come in the spring term of year 9, which in our opinion is too late. Most of the pupils have already made up their minds by this point, so the initiatives to encourage language uptake are only being heard by a small minority of pupils 'sitting on the fence.' Nevertheless, some of the ideas being used are positive. The department organises a presentation by Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 pupils with the help of the language assistants in order to demonstrate what teaching and learning of languages can be like further up the school, and why it has benefited those students. There is the belief that a presentation by their peers is likely to be seen as more credible than a teacher seemingly 'pontificating' about their future. They speak the same language and the older pupils know and understand which types of activities would appeal to year 9 pupils. One of the activities which always attracts pupils is the promise of a trip to the target language country and this school is no different as it offers exchanges in both years 9 and 10. Exchanges and trips are particularly noted on the Student Voice questionnaires which the department have just started using at the end of years 9 and 11 in order for the pupils to give their opinions on which activities they enjoyed most and why they chose to continue studying languages (or not for year 9).

With regard to the actual teaching of languages, there is a departmental policy in place whereby pupils in year 9 start studying the GCSE text and look at past GCSE papers to show the ease of language learning at Key Stage 4. The idea that gaining a GCSE in MFL is more difficult than in other subject areas maybe needs to be addressed, and introducing GCSE work during year 9 could be a way of achieving this. There is also a programme in place for some pupils to take their GCSE at the end of year 10, and this has been piloted this

year. These 'Fast Track' pupils have been attending extra classes in order to complete the required study and coursework in order to obtain their GCSE. The idea of the Fast Track system is to encourage pupils with the lure of possibly taking a second language. For example if they chose Fast Track French because they had been studying it since year 7, then they could pick up Spanish in year 9 and take that through to year 11. This means that by the end of year 10 they would hold one language GCSE and by the end of year 11 they could have obtained two.

The final 'push' to encourage language uptake is the 'Language Awareness Day' at a local university where they can witness first hand the thrills and benefits of continuing to study languages. This day is particularly aimed at medium to high-ability pupils who are unsure if they wish to continue their language study. The participants for this year have all decided to continue studying French after taking part in this day, and beating other schools in the area in a competition organised on the day.

Whilst interviewing the Head of Department we were obviously interested in what they were doing to encourage language uptake, however we were also interested in gauging what the department as a whole felt could be done better, and which activities or sessions might encourage more pupils to continue their language study. There were the obvious choices of more school trips and 'stop the clock' days where the whole school would participate in language activities for a whole day. At other schools these types of days have proved to be extremely successful and a lot of fun, and the department believe it could be achieved at their school with a little encouragement. Languages need to be made more relevant and up-to-date and there has been significant mention in the press regarding language teaching:

“The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority said some topics - such as ordering food and writing to pen-friends - were uninspiring.” (*Language teaching 'too boring'*, June 11 2004)

It is necessary to improve the range of activities and topics in order to appeal to the current younger generation.

In addition there seems to be a strong desire to encourage and increase links between the world of work and language teaching by encouraging businesses where languages are used to visit the school and to invite local people in the community to share their experiences with the

pupils. For example with the increase of immigration there are more and more foreign families in the area, which lends itself the possibility for cross-curricular learning. This is what one school in Gloucester did in order to show the link between work and languages:

“This year they invited speakers from the Army Intelligence Corps, the International Office of Gloucester LEA and a tour operator. These talks were very successful and helped students to see how languages are used in the ‘real world’. Plans for the future include inviting speakers from a holiday company and a flight attendant from an international airline.” (Dene Magna School, n.d.)

Another way to particularly target boys is to invite foreign footballers who play at local clubs to demonstrate how they use languages in their everyday lives by living and working in another country. For example an article from BBC News states

“Football and pasta are being used to lure boys into learning Italian and other languages they often shy away from.” (*Football breaks down language barrier*, June 13 2001)

Boys attending a Language Awareness Day at a University were introduced to various languages through topics such as football, food and drink in order to demonstrate how different languages appear in our everyday lives.

“Linking languages and sport is proving to have a very positive effect on language learning...Impact ranges from a raised profile and perception of the Languages Department to improved behaviour, attainment and achievement in lessons and increased uptake of language courses at Key Stage 4.” (*Languages and sport*, n.d.)

Another idea mentioned would be having language taster days to introduce the pupils to languages they may have not come across. Encouraging members of the community or PGCE students to do a 10 minute session on another language can prove that once you know one language picking up another is made a whole lot easier. This has been done in other schools around the country and proved to be successful.

“This year, during the whole school International Week, which aims to raise students’ global awareness, MFL teachers offered

taster lessons in Russian, Italian, Swahili and Spanish.” (Dene Magna School, n.d.)

Case Study B

The next school we interviewed might be described as a ‘slightly challenging’ school. It is situated in a primarily working class area where the likelihood of the pupils needing a language in their working life is significantly low. This is a common theme throughout the country in areas such as this.

“The changes at school level, [have] led to fewer working class children going on to study languages at degree level. Only 12% of entrants were from lower social class backgrounds, compared with 15% for all subjects.” (*Schools ‘damaging’ language teaching*, Nov 17 2003)

Despite the catchment area, the uptake of languages at Key Stage 4 is approximately 50% which in my opinion shows a real commitment by the MFL department to encourage and foster language learning. Their main commitment appears to be improving and maintaining the quality of teaching and learning in the MFL classroom through good relationships with the pupils. They believe by maintaining quality that this in turn will lead to increasing numbers opting to take a language at Key Stage 4.

In addition to creating positive relationships, there are a number of initiatives in place in order to improve the general feeling towards languages. There are language clubs at lunchtimes and after school for all Key Stage 3 and the MFL department has organised, in collaboration with the PE department, a football tournament for year 9 boys, whereby prior to kick-off they were asked a language related question and if they answered correctly their team received an extra goal. It proved to be extremely successful and competitive, and allowed the pupils to see their teachers in a whole different light.

A priority of this particular department is to create strong links with parents, as they understand the extent of influence parents have on pupils’ decisions during option time. The department phones parents around Christmas and February to discuss their child’s progress and to encourage further language study. In addition to this, they send home

letters of praise to approximately 85-90% of year 9 pupils. These letters include bullet points demonstrating the importance of studying a language, university facts and figures, and quotes from year 10 pupils revealing why they chose to continue studying a language. These letters are usually sent around Christmas and February. By sending the letters and calling at Christmas time, the department is trying to develop good relationships by not allowing their attempts to appear insincere. Furthermore, throughout Key Stage 3 the department send out target language postcards whenever they feel praise is necessary for a particular pupil.

Presentations and talks by members of the community and older students seem to be a common practice used by a majority of schools and this school is no exception. In addition, they organise a trip or exchange to the target language country in year 7; this can foster positive feelings towards language learning from the outset.

Throughout Key Stage 3 there is a general programme of rewarding pupils through a rewards board where the pupils' names or examples of work appear on the board in the languages department. They also have a Student of the Month initiative with a certificate, credits and a chocolate prize. Even though figures and statistics are important, the department places its emphasis on genuine and continuous praise and encouragement.

The relationship between pupils and teachers is of paramount importance in the department's practice and philosophy. Teachers talk to pupils on a regular basis regarding the importance of studying a language at GCSE level. They also conduct a rough survey of those who wish to continue studying a language and target those on the borderline with encouragement and phone calls to parents. Finally, we asked the question of whether they believe it is beneficial to use target language and authentic materials in order to make the language seem more 'real' and significant. This particular department emphasises the need to use target language appropriately and considerately with a general means to improving pupils' progression in the four key skill areas. The main point emphasised is that the relationship between staff and pupils should be fostered to maintain and promote enthusiasm for language learning.

The department generally feels they provide a great deal in order to encourage uptake at Key Stage 4, and as previously mentioned, they are currently working at 50% which is perceived to be considerably successful taking into account the catchment area. Nevertheless, the department constantly analyses what it can do to provide more opportunities to stress the importance of language learning. There are a number of recommendations which we can suggest in order to increase the number of pupils taking languages further, however I feel as if other schools can learn from the good practices and attitudes at this school particularly where relationships with the pupils and parents are concerned.

Case Study C

In the light of the current modern foreign languages debacle throughout secondary schools nationwide, which in spite of the government's somewhat unfeasible benchmark of between 50% and 90% of pupils taking a language qualification at Key Stage 4, is in reality a deplorable 17% (*Languages in Key Stage 4*, n.d.). It is therefore interesting to gain an insight into the current climate from the independent sector's perspective, in which provision and take-up of languages is allegedly "better on almost all counts ...than in the maintained sector" (*Languages in Key Stage 4*, n.d.). Whilst a number of maintained schools grapple with notions of poor parental support and negative stance *vis-à-vis* the importance of Modern Foreign Languages, in addition to the appeal of presumed 'easier' GCSEs, which ultimately results in poor Key Stage 4 uptake figures, the independent sector boasts uptake figures of approximately 75% (*Languages in Key Stage 4*, n.d.).

Arguably, one of the most influential and fundamental facets affecting uptake figures of modern foreign languages at Key Stage 4 is the school's study programme and policy. At the independent school in which we interviewed the Head of Languages, the school's policy is such that pupils are required to study French and German in year 7. In year 8 all pupils continue studying both languages, with the majority beginning either Latin, Russian or Spanish. In year 9 all pupils continue to study German, but may either discontinue or take up either French, Spanish or Latin. In year 10 all students will continue with

either one, two or three of the languages studied in year 9, culminating in the sitting of GCSE examinations in year 11.

As the study of modern languages is a mandatory requirement in the pupils' educational programme, the main emphasis from the department's perspective is to enhance the pupils' enjoyment and enthusiasm for each individual language in order to promote the study of more than one language, or in any case uptake of one of the optional languages in year 8. After interviewing the Head of Languages at the school, we were able to elicit the following areas of good practice with regards to the encouragement of further language study at Key Stage 4 and beyond.

In years 7 and 8, the department organises a lunchtime club called a *la carte* in which pupils learn about and subsequently cook food from other cultures, with a focus on food from the languages offered by the department, such as a Russian tea party, *Kaffee und Kuchen*, and the pupils running a French *café* making their own *crêpes*. The department also offers a trip to Cologne at Christmas for pupils in year 8 and an exchange programme in year 9 for pupils studying German. In addition to these trips are various other visits and home-stays which are offered by the other languages in the department.

In order to endorse the study of modern foreign languages at both Key Stage 4 and beyond, the department organises a talk in which former A-level pupils come in to talk to year 9 pupils about their experiences and how studying a language has benefited their careers, which this year included a former pupil who used her German skills to correspond with subsidiary branches of her office abroad, and a pupil whose provisional university choice had required her to offer a language as part of her conditional offer to study medicine. Another way in which the department targets year 9 pupils is through the department's annual languages morning in which the French, German and Spanish departments organise activities such as singing, cooking, dancing and drama to encourage further study at Key Stage 4. The morning also includes a speech from the Head of Languages at Sheffield Hallam University who emphasises the benefits of studying a language at Key Stages 4, 5 and beyond.

In the light of reports from organisations such as CiLT, which claim that

“a few teachers criticised the GCSE specifications for being uninteresting and often irrelevant to pupils - despite the attempts by QCA to persuade awarding bodies to include topics that are relevant to candidates and reflect their maturity, and to set less prescriptive tasks”(Language teaching too boring, n.d.),

the department conducts an annual survey in order to elicit why pupils have chosen to continue or discontinue further study of a specific language, in order to gain direct feedback from year 9 pupils, thus affecting the department’s strategy and schemes of work for the subsequent school year. In addition to this, the various departments meet on a weekly basis to discuss matters of importance, while the department of modern foreign languages as a whole meets at least once a term to discuss broader issues, including uptake of languages at Key Stage 4, and possible strategies to improve this situation. One such strategy, which has emerged due to the department’s meeting schedule, is that, while the department’s focus is targeted primarily at year 9 pupils during options week, it is intended as an on-going process. The department has, however, decided to target year 8 pupils next year as well, as it is believed that many pupils make fundamental decisions regarding the options they will take for Key Stage 4 at this time.

Other than trips, home-stays and activity days, the department uses authentic materials and target language to a great extent. Each individual language department has its own language assistant, and authentic materials such as DVDs, CDs, magazines and newspaper articles are used on a regular basis to maintain interest and encourage language awareness. Over and above this strategy, the department also uses its own experiences and cultural awareness to maintain enthusiasm, including photographs and experiences from places of interest, as well as the language assistants who can offer their own authentic experiences.

While the department endeavours to make language learning as authentic and interesting as possible, it also adheres to detailed schemes of work, which ensure that all areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing are covered in depth. This also includes specific targeting of German and Russian, which, due to their perceived difficulty, are considered with more detail in the schemes of work to ensure that pupils receive appropriate teaching, allowing them to enjoy these languages while tackling grammar issues, for example.

While the curriculum can create a scheme of work which is on occasion limited, extra-curricular activities such as exchanges and trips and the languages club, as well as optimum use of authentic materials, target language and teaching assistants, ensure that the pupils' language learning experience is as rich as possible.

Case Study D

Another interesting, and rather atypical, example of a school with maintained status, is the fourth school that we visited. Unlike a vast number of other maintained schools throughout the country, the study of at least one foreign modern language is part of the pupils' mandatory education. In spite of research from CiLT, which declares that

“since languages have become optional for pupils over 14, the proportion of pupils taking a GCSE in a modern language has fallen from 80% to 50%”, and that “40 secondary schools did not offer a single pupil for GCSE in 2007...[with] German entries down by 10.2% to 81,061 and French down by 8.2% to 216,718” (Macleod, Donald, *Tables blamed for drop in languages uptake*),

our fourth school boasts figures of 50% of pupils opting to study two languages at GCSE level in 2007. Following an interview with the Head of Department, we were able to discover the following areas of good practice that have been put into place at the school with a means to promoting further study at Key Stage 4 and beyond.

In a similar vein to the independent school that we visited, the department's central focus was on encouraging a positive choice from year 9 pupils, first and foremost by providing sessions highlighting the importance of languages and the benefits of studying them to a higher level in a session called The Key. This session is also repeated with year 11 pupils to encourage uptake of pupils studying a modern foreign language at Key Stage 5. The department has also invested in special languages packs which include, for example, case studies of famous sports personalities and celebrities and how many languages they can speak, in addition to the advantages that bilingualism or multilingualism can have as a result of their language capabilities.

At classroom level, the department encourages its staff to share their authentic experiences with pupils and the importance of studying a

language, in addition to the use of music, internet videos, a trip in year 8 to France and various trips to Spain for years 9 to 13, as well as a theatre group which visits the school in order to promote study of modern languages. The department also enlists the help of other pupils to encourage further language study, especially A-level students to target year 11 pupils in all three languages.

Perhaps on a more fundamental level, the department actively seeks to pursue pupils' GCSE options in year 9 with a means to facilitate an individual pupil's needs, e.g. by encouraging them to study a subsequent language, or less if it is felt that this could have a detrimental effect on the pupil's workload and capabilities. In order to accommodate pupils who, for the most part, find language learning difficult, the department offers an NVQ course, which is the equivalent to three GCSEs. An ensuing benefit of the NVQ course is the principal business element, which allows pupils to visit local businesses and consequently promote language learning and its inherent advantages for business, of which there is currently a lack of this skill in business and enterprise.

While the department's prime focus is on year 9 pupils, they also endeavour to promote language study throughout all Key Stages. The department uses small video clips with younger pupils and encourages project work in which pupils create their own celebrity family, for example. In the school's main feeder school, the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) endeavours to teach other subjects through target language, and for year 7 pupils the department organises pen friends in German. This initiative is very successful despite the implicit consumption of time, which could potentially stifle the effect of the scheme.

Despite the palpable benefits of the department's various initiatives and schemes, the Head of Department also highlighted a number of potential problems with regard to the promotion of further language study. Due to the nature of the pupils' choices in year 9 means that sole study of a GCSE in German or Spanish is not possible unless combined with an additional language. As a consequence, only French can be studied on its own, which may mean that some pupils do not opt for an additional language at all. As CiLT explain, "schools should be warned against introducing ill-considered options systems which will weaken their ability to offer high-quality teaching in Key Stage 3 [ages 11 to 14]

and have a detrimental effect on the motivation of pupils at all levels”, furthermore CiLT research says that

“sometimes, streaming systems [mean] less able pupils [are] guided into non-language options.” (*Schools ‘damaging’ language teaching*, n.d.).

A further elemental constraint is that of time. While the theatre group and The Key sessions are effective, they occur only once annually, which means that their impact is most likely limited. We also spoke with the school’s trainee teacher who is working in the languages department who iterated the issue of time constraints and the subsequent lack of impact on pupils’ decision-making. With regard to The Key session in which a speaker visited the school and showed a video in which she had done rock climbing and skiing etc, and then spoke of the benefits of being able to speak a foreign language to help her do such activities, it was felt that the effect on pupils was potentially limited as the session was only conducted once a year and only with pupils in years 9 and 11. Moreover, it was believed that the most important asset to the promotion of language learning was school trips and authenticity during the language learning process. Particularly successful was the school’s Spanish trip with year 8 pupils, during which they had to fill in booklets and complete exercises whilst in the country, which resulted in noted enthusiasm and engagement with the language. Despite the impact of time constraints, however, the general feeling in the department is that much is being done to target the up-take of further language study at Key Stage 4 and beyond.

Recommendations

Through our research into how schools are encouraging language uptake at Key Stage 4, we have observed some good practice which we will outline in brief. For example, one of our most positive findings has been the significance bestowed upon parental influence and relationships with the relevant department. This includes contacting parents to discuss their child’s progress and options, as well as postcards featuring ‘sound bytes’ from year 10 pupils. Perhaps of fundamental importance, however, is the significance of pupil-teacher relationships with a means to promote further study of foreign

languages, which was seen in all the departments that we visited. This manifested itself in a number of initiatives such as a football tournament (which specifically targeted boys), languages days; visits from theatre groups and guest speakers; a pen friend scheme; various trips; exchanges and home-stays.

One of the most influential strategies in place within the departments visited was that of pupil voice. A number of departments conduct annual questionnaires in which they attempt to elicit why pupils have decided to either continue or discontinue with their foreign language study. In all cases this has proven to be of key importance in order to create subsequent language strategies within departments, whilst allowing the pupils to feel that they are part of the process.

Finally, two of the departments that we visited invited Key Stage 4 and 5 pupils to come and talk with Key Stage 3 pupils about the benefits of further language study. This included how languages have helped them to obtain a place at their choice of university, and how they can be used in the world of work. Moreover, one of the departments that we visited introduced elements of the Key Stage 4 syllabus at Key Stage 3, with a means to demonstrate the potential accessibility of GCSE language study.

Overall, we believe that pupil voice and parental influence have the greatest impact on a pupil's decision to either continue or discontinue study of a foreign language.

What factors affect pupils' decisions in taking a language at Key Stage 4?

This section of the essay will have a more pupil-focussed aspect to it, as it will attempt to examine the factors affecting pupils' decision-making with regard to language uptake at Key Stage 4. It will be centred on research carried out in four different schools, covering three local education authority areas. The research takes the form of a series of eight semi-structured interviews with pupils in year 10. As the name would suggest, a semi-structured interview is seen as a more informal interview technique which is guided only in the form of a framework into which certain issues are incorporated. No direct questions are asked; in fact many of the issues raised during the interview derive from the interviewees themselves. This allows for flexibility and a natural flow of thought and conversation. Interviews were conducted in groups usually of about ten pupils, the advantage being that pupils would feel more comfortable in putting their views forward, and that issues and ideas could be bounced around. In each instance pupils were made aware of the aims and objectives of our project, and pupils were assured of the anonymity of their input. The framework for the semi-structured interview below was constructed in order to seek out the following information.

Issues to be discussed: A framework

Reasons why pupils chose to continue studying a language;

Reasons why pupils chose not to take a language;

The extent to which pupils think learning a foreign language will benefit them.

What factors influence their decision to choose a language at Key Stage 4?

Due to the varying nature of the schools involved, for example with one school being a designated Language College, (thus all pupils have to take a language), this form of research was never intended to provide

direct comparisons in a scientific manner. It does, however, provide interesting strands of both similarities and differences amongst pupils in quite different educational circumstances. The aim of this section is therefore limited to providing an overview of the reasons in favour of continuing language study at Key Stage 4, as well as the reasons for pupils choosing to discontinue studying a language. The structure of this section will roughly follow that of the interview framework, however it is felt that it would be more beneficial to directly compare and contrast issues arising from the first two questions in the same paragraph.

Immediately evident from our research, across all schools and classes interviewed, was the high level of importance placed by pupils on the quality, or perceived quality of teaching of languages they had received. As a foreword to this paragraph, it is important to note that this essay has absolutely no intention of lecturing teachers on how they should conduct their lessons, nor does it intend to explicitly or implicitly criticise individual teachers or the teaching profession as a whole. It does however, aim to reflect the opinions given by a cross-section of pupils from different schools with regard to language teaching, and thus highlight the significant role played by the teacher with regard to the uptake of languages. Pupils who had chosen to study languages and had a generally positive view of them said that they enjoyed their lessons. When pressed to give more detailed information on what they found good about language teaching common answers were; the inclusion of games in lessons, the effective use of ICT, for example interactive whiteboard presentations, pupils being given an active role in the lesson through speaking and pair work activities. A number of pupils also stated that they enjoyed being given information by the teacher about the countries where the language was spoken. In contrast, pupils who had a negative view of languages and in the most part chose not to take a language at Key Stage 4, cited what they perceived to be poor teaching and boring lessons. Boring lessons were described widely as those that are primarily teacher led, with pupils either not being given the opportunity, or not feeling able to participate in the lesson. Another complaint raised regularly was that of teachers teaching purely from textbooks considered unimaginative and repetitive. The role of the teacher in this matter is confirmed by Parker and Tinsley, who state “for languages, more than any other subject, the

teacher's role is crucial" and "in languages more than any other subject teachers need to communicate enthusiasm and bring the subject to life." (Parker and Tinsley, 2005, p66)

It follows that if language lessons are to be enjoyable and enthusing it should be backed up by a curriculum that is equally stimulating and enthusing. Even those who had a generally positive view of languages however felt improvements needed to be made on what content was taught at Key Stage 3. The subject matter taught at Key Stage 3 was widely considered to be irrelevant to the pupils. Specific criticisms included the teaching of vocabulary related to school and the environment, as pupils felt they would never wish to discuss this with anyone of their age group from another country. A number of pupils also expressed a concern that they were taught how to give information and responses to questions, but felt they did not have the ability to ask questions, which they felt would be important for communication with native speakers. The issue of explicit grammar teaching was also raised, and whilst some students said they felt too much grammar was taught, it did not appear to be a major issue. It can be hoped that the introduction of the new curriculum from September 2008 will alleviate much of this discontent towards what areas of language are taught at Key Stage 3, however until its implementation is complete, these hopes are purely speculative.

Another major issue, which was raised by pupils from all four schools, was the fact they felt severely restricted in which language or combination of languages they were offered or in one case allocated. In all the schools involved in our research, pupils felt that they were given limited choice in the languages offered at secondary level. Pupils who had a particular interest in a certain language or had prior knowledge or experience expressed frustration on learning that they were unable to develop competences in this area. In particular, certain pupils who had learnt a specific language at primary school or were exposed to language at home felt disappointed that they were unable to continue learning this language at Key Stage 3. In one of the schools the issue centred on the fact that all pupils had to study French at Key Stage 4. Pupils who had a desire to study German could only do so as a second language alongside the compulsory French. Some pupils stated that if given the choice they would have preferred to study solely German. They felt that studying the two languages could have a detrimental

effect on their preferred German, and may have been a factor in dissuading other pupils from opting for German. One year 10 pupil asserted, “I have little interest in learning French, and I often get confused between French and German.” In all the schools involved in our research pupils felt that they were given limited choice in the languages offered at secondary level.

Possibly the most surprising aspect of the research carried out relates to a question posed to the year 10s: if they were given a completely free choice, would there be any languages that they would be interested in studying. A vast majority of students across all four schools showed an interest in this question, including pupils who had shown little interest in the discussion previously. A huge range of European and international languages were put forward as languages that pupils would have an interest in studying. These included; Latin, Greek, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Polish, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Bengali, Maori and Cornish. Pupils at a school not widely offering Spanish also expressed disappointment at being unable to learn this language. This research provides further justification for ideas put forward by Phillips as early as 1989 that called for a diversification of language teaching within the national curriculum. Specifically Filmer-Sankey calls for the opinions of pupils to be taken into account when schools decide what languages to offer by stating,

“there is no doubting that pupils do respond differently to various languages and that such considerations must take their place alongside any practical considerations when diversification is being planned. The current research of OXPROD indicates that it is through the assessment of pupil attitudes that these differential responses may best be defined.” (Filmer-Sankey, Phillips 1989, p 106)

It therefore, has to be noted with regret that the national curriculum did not to any great extent provide a diversification of languages. In fact on the contrary, prior to the new curriculum to be introduced in 2008 severe political limitations were placed on the teaching of languages, to the level that schools were forced to offer pupils a language of the European Union as the first foreign language.

Whilst discussing the issue as to how beneficial or relevant languages

would be, pupils had understandably contrasting views. It cannot be viewed with great surprise that, in general, those pupils continuing to study a language at Key Stage 4 viewed them as important and beneficial, whereas pupils who had chosen not to take a language argued they were of little relevance. An overriding opinion from those pupils who felt learning a language would be of little benefit was that language learning was unnecessary due to a perceived omnipresence of English around the world. The high percentage of pupils offering this response, would suggest that this attitude is reflective of an attitude commonly found in society, at least across the North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire area covered by this research. There also appears to be an issue that a significant number of pupils felt that their level of language competency after completing a GCSE would not be high enough for them to be able to use the language effectively. This may indeed be linked with the idea that pupils need not learn a foreign language due to the prevalence of English. Both of these attitudes portray an attitude that language, and therefore language learning, is purely for communication purposes. Thus conspicuous by their absence amongst many pupils are notions often held by language teachers. These are, that their subjects facilitate the study of the cultures and societies in which languages are spoken, and further, that by learning other peoples' languages one exhibits a respect and acceptance of their cultures. Only at one school, a language college with a much higher ratio of pupils from differing ethnic backgrounds did pupils express the desire to learn a language because as one year 10 pupil asserted,

“it helps us learn about people and things in different countries.”

On a more positive note for those wishing to promote languages, the message to persuade pupils that languages can be used in a wide range of professions appears to have been taken on board by a large cross section of pupils. One year 10 pupil from a school, and from an area for that matter not renowned for success with languages, stated that she hoped languages would give her “wider opportunities in the job market.” Certain pupils also suggested that they felt having a language qualification would look good on their CV. Closely related to this is that some pupils felt their chances of being accepted at a good university would be helped by having studied a language at Key Stage 4.

The final issue raised during the semi-structured interviews related to what influenced the pupils when considering whether or not to take a

language. It is in this section that the greatest difference between schools and social backgrounds was to be found. The first topic raised was how much effect parental influence had on the decision-making process. None of the pupils interviewed stated that their parents openly tried to dissuade them from taking a language, even amongst pupils who had decided not to take a language. One pupil did however state that his parents felt there was no worth in studying German, and that if they wanted to take a language, French would be the most beneficial for them. One of the schools in which the languages department had made considerable effort to engage parents proved reasonably successful in their work. Around a third of pupils stated that their parents had attempted to persuade them to take a language, and of those three quarters did take a language partly as a result of that parental influence. At another school, with similar intake in terms of achievement and social background parental influence was notably lower. Only one of the pupils interviewed stated that their parents had tried to influence their decision in favour of taking a language. Pupils at the other two schools involved, both of which are found notably higher in the GCSE league tables and are widely considered to take pupils from a higher social class, showed levels of parental influence similar to that of the first school.

Another influencing factor that produced differing results across the schools covered relates to access to native speakers, both in terms of trips abroad and access to the language assistant in school. One school, a language college, has well established and successful exchanges and trips available to a wide variety of pupils across different year groups. All of the pupils in one of the groups we interviewed at this school agreed that they were looking forward to taking part in the German exchange, as it had a good reputation across the school. Of this group a number of the pupils stated that the opportunity to take part in this exchange was a contributory factor in choosing German. Although the pupils stated that on a previous trip to Germany they spoke little German, they felt that it led to a greater interest in learning the subject and left them with an extremely positive impression of Germany. This argument is confirmed by Fisher and Evans who, in a study on French exchanges, conclude that “there is a definite link between learning and exchanges that would certainly warrant the languages teacher’s efforts.”

From their research into the effectiveness of one language exchange with France, they state

“there was clearly an improved grasp of the cultural practices of the target country. Attitudes towards the French have also shifted noticeably and the pupils were much more likely to view the French more favourably than they did before the visit, rating them higher for qualities such as friendliness and tolerance.” (Fisher & Evans, 2000, p.15).

Indeed from personal experience it is evident that trips aboard play an invaluable role in motivating pupils, enhancing the relevance of that language to them and in establishing a relationship with the country in question.

Another issue relating to exposure of pupils to the country and culture of the target language is the use of native speaking language assistants within school. Through interviews with year 10 pupils it became apparent that the vast majority of pupils from all the schools involved or researched enjoyed the fact that native speakers were present, and found it beneficial to their learning of the language in year 10. Language assistants seemed to play a significant role in all the schools involved in this project. One of the main benefits was that pupils felt more confident in using the target language when speaking to the FLA and when working in small groups. As a result of the informality of the relationship between pupils and the FLA many pupils feel more at ease when conducting speaking activities. However, in two of the schools we researched, the low exposure to language assistants in Key Stage 3 suggested that this was not a contributing factor in their decision to take a language at Key Stage 4.

As the initiatives implemented by the different schools have been covered at length in other parts of this project, it is felt necessary to mention only to the extent they were discussed by the pupils during the interviews. At three out of the four schools, pupils felt that measures used by their schools had little impact. A number of pupils did have vague memories of being spoken to by various guests on the topic, but showed little enthusiasm for the initiatives. Another point made by a significant percentage of pupils was that all departments, including their languages department appeared to make an effort to promote their subject in the weeks immediately prior to them taking their

options. This was however, too late to have any impact on pupils as they had made their decisions prior to this point. Only at one school did pupils have a positive impression of the work done by their language department to promote the subject. Specific examples from this school came in the form of a football tournament organised in year 9 as a way of building a positive rapport between members of staff and year 9 boys and a French cooking evening lead by the FLA, but also involving most other members of staff in the department. Although the majority of pupils found these enjoyable experiences, none of them believed it had a concrete influence on their option-making process. As a result of this evidence it could be argued that efforts made in year 9 are likely to be ineffective, no matter how original or extensive the ideas are, unless it is part of an enjoyable language learning experience throughout Key Stage 3 as a whole.

Conclusions

In concluding this report its inherent limitations should first be acknowledged. Unfortunately, due to the limited nature of this project, the research undertaken serves to merely scratch the surface of many possible areas of enquiry. Given time and resources, it would have been of great interest for example to conduct a more sociological study into how economic, class and ethnic background affects language uptake. It should also be remembered that as a result of the complex nature of the issue, this project cannot pretend to provide a definitive strategy for schools, and can only be analysed and considered as a contribution to the topic. It is however hoped the study raises useful issues and offers some practical solutions for those within the teaching establishment who wish to see an increased uptake of languages at Key Stage 4.

It is evident from this report that language departments are acknowledging the changing nature of their role against the backdrop of increasingly unfavourable climate for language teaching. In addition to the tasks of teaching, assessing, reporting and pastoral care, many teachers are in the constant process of marketing their subject towards increased uptake at Key Stage 4. It is undoubtedly clear though that many pupils are motivated by exposure to 'real' language, such as through the use of FLAs and trips abroad. Given the current circumstances it may be necessary for schools to maximise these

aspects of language teaching and learning as a tool for marketing the subject. A further recommendation of this report would be that whatever methods schools attempt to employ, consideration must be given to the timing of this intervention. The research carried out would suggest that unless pupils are happy with the language teaching they receive throughout Key Stage 3 they are unlikely to positively choose a language at Key Stage 4. There are however wider issues that need to be taken into account. It is felt that language departments and other bodies could do more collaborative work in order to enthuse pupils for languages. This is something taken up with apparent success in the South West, wherein a large number of events are provided and the uptake of languages is comparatively high. Furthermore, if schools as organisations are serious about increasing language uptake, the options process has to be favourable and as wide variety of languages as possible should be offered. Therefore, it is the conclusion of this essay that specific measures taken to marketing languages should form part of an accessible and enthusing Key Stage 3 language learning experience, rather than as standalone measures put into place the weeks prior to pupils choosing their Key Stage 4 options.

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