Language Learning Journal, Summer 2002, No 25, 4-7

Foreign language learning in England in the 21st century[1]

Norbert Pachler
Institute of Education, University of London

"the DfES articulates a 'vision' for FL learning with potentially far-reaching and very damaging consequences for FLs in Britain."

12 February, 2002 might well become a defining date for foreign language (FL) learning in England, as this day marked the publication of a new DfES policy statement on language learning (DfES, 2002a) as an appendix to the Green Paper *14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES, 2002b) which sets out the government's 'strategy for improving Britain's performance at languages over the next decade and beyond'.

In this short paper, published a decade after the first NC MFL Orders, the DfES articulates a 'vision' for FL learning with potentially far-reaching and very damaging consequences for FLs in Britain. It is a vision which signals a complete break with recent FL policy as well as one which is no longer characterised by notions of FLs for all pupils aged 11 to 16. In addition it is a vision of an education system no longer characterised – at least nominally – by a diversified FL curriculum (if it ever was). It is the culmination of successive moves to weaken the position of FLs as an integral part of curricular requirements of young people (i.e. disapplication) in response to their apparent worrying reluctance to engage with FLs and to the acute shortage of qualified FL teachers in Britain (see e.g. Pachler, 2001).

In addition to proposing the discontinuation of FL study at 14 and the relegation of FLs to 'servicing' the prevailing narrow and prescriptive literacy agenda, the DfES paper sets out certain 'ambitions'. Each item below is taken from the policy statement and is followed by a comment of my own in brackets:

- all primary school children will be entitled to study languages by 2012 (without making it a compulsory part of the national curriculum and by relying on expertise and resources outside school, e.g. native speakers and language assistants rather than necessarily expert teachers with requisite methodological knowledge);
- to have at least 200 Specialist Language Colleges by 2005 (without citing any quantitative and/or qualitative evidence in support of the effectiveness of the Specialist School 'philosophy');
- all young people and adults will have the opportunity to learn languages and be motivated to do so (without clarifying how a proposal manifestly weakening the status of FLs can bring this about);
- the number of people studying languages in further and higher education and in work-based training will increase (without making FLs a specified component of the 14-19 curriculum and without noting the fact that university language departments are being closed down, leaving the sector in deep crisis [see e.g. Nuffield, 2000: 7 and Kelly, 2002]);
- languages will be properly recognised and valued by society and competence will be recognised (without specifying any concrete proposal for improving the low status of FLs in society; the policy does mention the government's intention of introducing a national system of recognising achievement in languages but no operational details are offered);
- local and regional networks will support primary schools and harness available resources to provide high quality language learning (without noting the potential countervailing effects of an increasingly selective education system [see e.g. Hattersley, 2002] where schools are forced to compete rather than collaborate with each other);
- to transform the national capability in languages (without giving any indication how this might be achieved); and
- to increase the number of people teaching languages, and to be innovative about using expertise 'wherever it can be found'

> (without acknowledging the considerable potential problems associated with relying on [untrained] native speakers and language assistants [see e.g. Pachler, 2001]).

The use of the word 'ambition' is indicative as the paper is strong on rhetoric but offers little more than a wish list: it has hardly any coherent, concrete and practicable policies on offer despite claiming in the introduction to be setting out "the strategy for improving Britain's performance at languages over the next decade and beyond". Whilst the analysis of the current *status quo* – or 'challenge' as the document puts it – offered seems broadly accurate, the policy conclusions drawn are highly questionable. The government rightly asserts that as a country "we do not value languages, or recognise the contribution they make to the economy and to society. We need to challenge this attitude and inspire people of all ages to learn a language" (DfES, 2002a: 3). It also rightly suggests that too few people study languages to Advanced and degree level. In 2000, for example, only 2.8% of all British state school pupils qualified in A level French and 1.1% in German (see Curtis, 2002). Similarly, languages and area studies in higher education can be seen to be going through a crisis with there being a decline in the number of students following specialist degrees in FLs, accompanied by staff losses and department closures representing a loss of vital expertise (see Kelly, 2002).

In a perverse sort of way the proposals outlined are likely to bring about one of the aims expressed in the title of the Green Paper, namely they are bound to raise the percentage of pupils achieving high grades at GCSE, although within a much smaller number of (comparatively more able and/or motivated) candidates. Whilst, therefore, the proposed policy of no longer making the study of a foreign language a compulsory element of the key stage 4 curriculum is likely to provide the government with a higher A*-C percentage rate of pupils entered, the question arises whether this does indeed equate to higher standards. Unless the current GCSE requirements are re-evaluated and the expectations at key stage 4 are re-calibrated, it is debatable whether an increase in percentage points does in fact constitute a real rise in standards. This is, of course, not to belittle the real achievements of many young people taking GCSEs in FLs. The issue is whether the current examination serves them all. Also, the percentage of young people leaving compulsory education with basic FL competence is likely to fall drastically.

As noted above, the only tangible proposal of the DfES paper (2002a: 6) is "to recognise the reality of large-scale disapplication of young people" (around 36,000 pupils during the academic year 2000-01) and no longer to 'force' those who find FLs very difficult and who often disrupt the learning of others to take up their entitlement at key stage 4. It could indeed be argued, as the government does, that this will not only allow those young people who do have an interest in FLs to concentrate better on the subject at key stage 4 but, furthermore, to allow them to take up a second foreign language by freeing up 50% (instead of hitherto 20%) of the key stage 4 curriculum by reducing compulsory requirements. However, such a policy is underpinned by a very specific – and narrow – conception of FL learning. Some, for example Field and Lawes (1999), maintain that a more academic approach to FLs might make the subject more attractive, at least to more able pupils, and might in turn even bring about an increase in take-up of specialist FL degrees. However, the current proposal seems to be a retrograde step in so far as it does nothing to ensure that those who do not think they want to study FLs – perhaps because of their low status in Britain – or who are simply not encouraged to do so beyond the age of 14 by their families and friends, will have achieved very little in the three years they will have had to study a FL in school.

I would argue that what is needed is a major rethink about the purposes of FLs in the curriculum, from which should flow considerable changes to content and methodology. Because it is difficult to predict which FL will be useful to young people in their (adult) lives, the main focus should be on language apprenticeship as well as on language and cultural awareness (see Pachler, 2000b and Pachler, Field and Norman, 1997). In the absence of such curricular revisions and a focus on the value of FL learning *inter alia* in relation to personal fulfilment and mutual understanding – rather than the currently prevailing vocational-utilitarian rationale (see also Williams, 2001) – it is likely that young learners will continue to be exposed to a predominantly transactional curriculum diet. A diet geared towards the memorisation of a strictly finite number of expressions and phrases in narrowly situational dialogues across topics of mainly adult (vocational and tourist) interest – rather than a genuine engagement with how a particular FL works and/or more broadly educational aims such as intercultural (communicative) competence (see e.g. Pachler, 2000a and 2000b).

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The real danger is that after a mere three years of FL study young people will have very little to show for their efforts. On the one hand, the curriculum time available will in all probability continue to be woefully inadequate to ensure even basic levels of sustained communicative competence. On the other hand it remains to be seen whether the proposed new national system of recognising achievement in FLs to be informed by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages will have sufficient currency and transparency to be meaningful to either learners or employers. Furthermore, the notion hinted at in the policy document for FL study at key stages 2 and 3 to be

primarily seen as supporting the government's emphasis on literacy is likely to do little for creative FL teaching and learning. It is highly likely that FLs will become subsumed in the government's standards agenda. Assertions such as "Our record in teaching modern foreign languages has historically not been good enough" (DfES, 2002a: 3) conjure up images of a highly prescriptive government document to be complied with by all FL teachers at all costs and do not bode well for the proposed publication of a National Language Strategy in the autumn of 2002. Above all, no evidence is provided that FL teaching is really under-performing given the highly challenging systemic pressures under which FL teachers have to operate, such as the low status of FLs, the strictly limited amount of curriculum time available for FLs compared with other countries (see e.g. Milton and Meara, 1998), the global importance of English, the strong anti-European sentiments in society or the fact that most children have tended to start their FL study much later than they do with other curriculum subjects.

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Whilst the Green Paper suggests schools will continue to be required to make FLs available to any pupils wishing to study them at key stage 4, the logistics remain unclear, particularly where this might concern a mere handful of pupils in certain languages. This uncertainty is very unlikely to attract well-qualified FL teachers into schools with a minimal curricular FL offer. More likely than not these schools will be found in socio-economically deprived areas where traditionally FLs have not had as easy a footing as in more middle-class areas, where pupils tend to have greater parental encouragement to study a FL and generally more opportunities to come into contact with FL speakers, for example through family holidays etc. There is a real danger that pupils in a good number of secondary schools are going to be even less likely than at the moment to have access to well-qualified FL teachers. The policy is, therefore, highly problematic in equal opportunity terms not least as compulsory FL study at key stage 3 will in future (post-2012!) 'build on' an entitlement (not a compulsion!) to FL study at primary school.

Given the fact that currently less than 15% of primary schools have specialist language teaching (see Smithers, 2002a and 2002b) and only about 21% of schools with key stage 2 are offering 'some form of' FL teaching to their pupils (see Powell et al., 2002: 3), provision in 2012 is likely to be still very patchy because of a shortage of Primary teachers with FL expertise, a highly overcrowded primary curriculum, the stranglehold of the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies etc. It seems rather odd that despite the findings of recent research commissioned by the QCA concerning the feasibility of primary FL teaching (see Powell et al., 2001) – which concluded that whilst a generally supportive attitude prevailed "the resources and infrastructure necessary to support any scaling up of existing provision are not sufficiently well developed to sustain the introduction of a national entitlement for all pupils" (QCA, 2001: 3) – the government should decide on a "dynamic new approach" (DfES, 2002a: 1) centring on the widening of opportunities for FL learning in the primary sector.

My experience of working with beginner teachers strongly suggests that it is the prospect of 'carving out a scholarly interest in working with young people on aspects of (FL) education' (Lambert, 2002) that attracts well-qualified graduates into the teaching profession. A sizeable number of them get disillusioned with the current curriculum which is insufficiently rewarding educationally or intellectually. Amongst other things, the curriculum and associated teaching methods are brought about by the late start of learning foreign languages at 11, which to some extent precludes a meaningful engagement with relevant topics and issues in line with the cognitive developmental stage of teenage learners. Rather than leading to the hoped for increase in the number of FL teachers, the government proposal might well have a negative impact on FL teacher supply by deterring the most able and enthusiastic FL graduates from entering the profession. Many graduates are currently looking for other ways of using their subject expertise for professional purposes rather than engaging in predominantly low-level activities seemingly devoid of a coherent educational rationale or intrinsic value (see also Pachler, 2001). Whilst the DfES paper does acknowledge the centrality of the supply of trained teachers 'and others with language expertise, including teacher assistants' (DfES, 2002a: 3), the actual policies proposed might well prove to be counterproductive. What is needed is an overhaul of the curriculum and the current examination prescriptions together with an improvement of the 'usefulness' of the subject (see e.g. Pachler, 2000a) rather than the adoption of a defeatist attitude towards FL education.

In most ways, therefore, the DfES proposal signals a retrograde step. Not only is it likely to leave large sections of future generations of young people with only a minimum exposure to FLs but it is also very likely to curtail considerably the diversity of FLs currently on offer in secondary schools in England – from an already low baseline. In order to ensure some sort of progression from the invariably patchy primary offering, which for historical reasons and reasons of teacher supply will most likely be dominated by French, most secondary schools will find themselves forced to revert to French as their core FL provision. The hard work of many FL educators throughout the last decade towards a more diversified curriculum is in danger of going to waste, despite, for instance, the recent popularity of Spanish. The 'languages for all' policy, only recently adopted, is thus close to being stillborn.

Trevor McDonald and John Boyd, the joint chairmen of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, and the members of their inquiry must be bitterly disappointed to see few of their recommendations (see Nuffield Inquiry, 2000) taken up in this DfES policy paper and, indeed, to see such little continuity as there has been for a decade or so being dismantled.

In short, the DfES proposal for FLs appears to be incompatible with the world-class education system the government claims to be aspiring to and is worryingly at odds with other European education systems, which accord much greater importance to FL knowledge and skills on the part of young people. The proposal weakens the already low status of FLs in Britain even further and moves the country even farther towards the periphery of the European Union.

> Our education system cannot prioritise everything at once. But equally, it will become a soulless machine if it simply concentrates on the utilitarian basics to the exclusion of all else. It needs to cultivate the joy of learning for its own sake, and an important part of that should be languages, so that (British citizens) have the chance to play (a) part as citizens of Europe and the wider world. (*The Independent*, 2002)

[1] Letters to the editors on the future of FLs in Britain are welcomed.

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