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**Teaching languages ‘to instill the love of learning’: school management, teacher and student voices in four UK schools**

**Introduction**

Global English is threatening motivation in English first-language speakers to learn any modern foreign languages (ML) at all (Lanvers 2014, Lo Bianco 2014). This problem is palpable in the many Anglophone countries, and especially discernible in the UK where education policy changes have caused a continual decrease in language learning over the last decades. As UK education varies considerably in its four nations (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), this chapter focuses on England, comparing beliefs on teaching and learning ML[[1]](#footnote-1) in four secondary schools among three stakeholder groups: students aged 13/14 (Year 9), their language teachers, and senior school management (Senior Management i.e. head teacher/assistant head). In the UK, schools of all types have considerably higher managerial autonomy e.g. over budget, teacher recruitment, and buildings; thus, the Senior Management team has considerable input in shaping their school.

The following section contextualizes ML learning and teaching at secondary school level, notably

* devolution of management to schools, that is a further increase of autonomy of schools, reducing influences of central and regional government
* factors specifically impacting on ML, that is
  + language education policy
  + the social divide in language learning, and
  + severe grading of ML

**Devolution and League Tables**

Both the last Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition and the current Conservative Government strongly support the notion of devolving power to individual schools, permitting Senior Management control over admissions, budget and curriculum. 57% of English state secondary schools are now school types with such autonomy (*Academies* or *Free Schools*) (Board / Tinsley 2015), increasing competition between schools (Ball et al. 2012). All secondary schools in England are subject to a ‘League Table’ of results for the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* (GCSE: nationally standardised and accredited tests in a variety of subjects at age 16+), the main indicator of academic success. Furthermore, ML is known to suffer from disproportionally severe grading at GCSE level and subsequent qualifications (A-level = Advanced level, school-leaving qualification permitting university entry, typically taken age 18+). At GCSE, students score on average one full grade below results in other subjects, based on both individual grades in other subjects and past grades, and A-level languages suffer greater attrition than other subjects (all data: Myers 2006). Schools with high levels of language take-up at GCSE may therefore have comparatively worse ‘League Table’ results (Board / Tinsley 2015:4), leading schools to let only few, high-achieving students continue with ML beyond the compulsory phase. Further factors encumbering ML teaching in UK secondary schools are *policy changes*, the unpopularity of languages as a *school subject*, and the increasing *social divide* in language learning uptake. These are discussed below.

**ML policy, subject image and social divide**

For a brief time only (1988-2004), the UK implemented compulsory language learning for all up to age 16. In 2004, language study was made optional from the age of 14 (Swarbrick 2011), leading to year-on-year reductions in students studying languages beyond the compulsory phase. Take-up of languages beyond age 14+ varies greatly from school to school, with most schools admitting only higher academic achievers to study a language beyond age 14 (Filmer-Sankey et al. 2010), leaving ‘a growing overall impression that schools are starting to regard languages as expendable for some pupils’ (Board / Tinsley 2015:9). A further problem regarding ML at secondary level is its unpopularity with students (Blenkinsop et al. 2006), who might think of the subject as boring, pointless and/or difficult. The knowledge that they can stop MLs at age 14 has worsened this negative image for learners age 11-14 (Evans / Fisher 2009,2). Furthermore, a rather inward-looking, monolingual English mentality may lead to an exaggerated perception of the global significance of English (Dewaele / Thirtle 2009). Without a doubt, within the EU, British students have the poorest motivation for language learning (Eurostat 2012).

The study of ML beyond the compulsory phase also acts as a social marker: 86% of private compared to only 44% of state schools have a policy of compulsory language *for some students* aged 14-16 (Board / Tinsley 2015). 76% of private, compared to only 18% of state schools make ML compulsory for all students for the ages 14-16 (Board / Tinsley 2015:119). In 28% of state schools, many students are not given the opportunity to study a language at age 14+. Generally, the more academically successful a state school is (measured by schools’ average GCSE results), and the better the average socio-economic status background of students, the higher the percentage of students studying ML beyond age 14 (Board / Tinsley 2015). For instance, the percentage of students studying a ML for their GCSE (i.e. age 14-16) correlates negatively with the percentage of pupils entitled to *free school meals*[[2]](#footnote-2), a reliable indicator of the relative social deprivation of a school’s intake (Board / Tinsley 2015). In addition, schools that are allowed to control their admissions (especially Academies) have more students studying ML at GCSE than other state schools. In general, devolution of power to schools permits Senior Management to shape their school according to socio-economic factors, in particular the social mix of their intake (Braun et al. 2011) and offers opportunities to schools to ‘cream off’ the best pupils (Goldring 2005). Thus, social segregation in UK schools, currently judged relatively average compared to other European countries (Jenkins et al. 2008), is likely to increase with devolution, as socially advantaged families can afford to live in catchment areas with more successful schools (Allen 2007, Burgess et al. 2014). Living close to a successful state school is associated with a disproportionate mark-up in house prices, enabling middle-class parents to ‘buy into’ the catchment area of popular state schools (Cheshire / Sheppard 2004).

To summarize, there is a strong social divide between those who learn languages beyond the compulsory level, and those who do not, a tendency facilitated by schools’ ability to determine admissions as well as their language policy. Students’ beliefs regarding languages as a school subject are more polarised than on other subjects, and, for Senior Management, the pressure of ‘League Tables’ militates against making languages compulsory beyond the strictly necessary. Frequent changes on the policy level suggest a lack of direction regarding the purpose of teaching ML (Pachler 2007). Governmental reports and investigations into the ML decline (Board / Tinsley 2015, Dearing 2007, Nuffield Foundation 2000) tend to highlight utilitarian benefits about language study (economic need, employability), neglecting ‘softer’ and less measureable benefits of language learning, such as personal enrichment, societal cohesion, intercultural understanding, tolerance and world citizenship.

The following empirical study triangulates views on ML teaching and learning from three groups (students, teachers, Senior Management), all operating under these challenging conditions. Senior Management, teachers’ and students’ beliefs about language learning and teaching from four different schools are compared. School include

* state and fee-paying schools
* schools which may control their own intake, and that may not
* schools that make languages compulsory for all aged 14-16, and that do not
* schools with low and high percentages of students entitled to free school meals.

The schools are situated in Northern England[[3]](#footnote-3), in an area of low ethnic diversity (average 95% white), with few students having a different first language English than English, and the lowest percentage of student studying a ML age 14-16 (for GCSE) in England (O’Donnell 2008).

**Research questions**

1. What do Senior Management, teachers and students think of the following issues: rationales for teaching/learning languages and current and possible future experiences of language learning?
2. How do opinions on the rationales and future of learning/teaching ML of school management, teachers and students differ betweenschools?

**Method**

In each school, one member of Senior Management and at least one language teacher were interviewed, and a minimum of three mixed-gender focus groups were organized with Year 9 students (aged 13-14) (randomly chosen, except for gender balance). Year 9 students were chosen as they or their schools must decide whether to continue with language study or not. Focus groups were employed to promote free discussion among students, and decrease inhibition in front of the researcher, especially important given the students’ age; this data-eliciting form is known to be particularly effective in reducing the felt gap between the researcher and the researched (Field 2000). Staff interviews lasted about 20-25 minutes and student focus groups about 15 minutes.

**Table 1: participants and data**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **School 1\*\*\*** | **School 2\*\*\*** | **School 3** | **School 4** | |
| **Student numbers\*** | 1495 | 1481 | 650 | 610 | |
| **% students sitting at least one language GCSE\*** | 95%+ | 95%+ | c. 25% | 95%+ | |
| **KS 3 language policy\*\*** | Near 100% study 2 MFL, 3 possible. Limited choice between 2 languages. | Near 100% study 2 MFL. No choice between 2 languages. | Near 100% study 1 MFL. | Near 100% study 2 MFL. Some choice between 2 languages. | |
| **KS 4 language policy \*\*** | 1 MFL GCSE compulsory, 2 or 3 possible depending on pathway (under 20% study 2 languages).  Some language choice. | 1 MFL GCSE compulsory, 2 possible depending on pathway (under 20% study 2 languages).  Some language choice. | 1 MFL GCSE for high ability doing pathway 1.  No pathway choice.  No language choice. | 1 MFL GCSE compulsory, 2 possible depending on pathway (under 10% study 2 languages).  Some language choice. | |
| **% of students eligible for Free School Meals\* in 2015** | 8.8% | 11.4% | 38.2% | N/A | |
| **% of students achieving 5+ a\*-c GCSocio-economic status 2015\*** | 66% | 56% | 54% | 79% | |
| **Data collected** | | | | | | |
| **Year 9 Student focus groups with 5-6 students (mixed gender)** | 5 groups = 28 students | 5 groups = 26 students | 5 groups = 28 students | 3 groups =17 students | |
| **Total no. student participants** | | | | | **83** | |
| **MFL Teachers** | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| **Total no. teachers** | | | | | **7** | |
| **School Management** | 1 Assistant Head | 1 Assistant Head | 1 Head Teacher | 1 Assistant Head | |

\* 2013 data from <http://www.education.gov.uk/>, retrieved 15 January 2015.

\*\* Data from school websites and Heads of MFL.

\*\*\* These State schools had a policy of compulsory language study up to age 16+ *at the time of data collection* but have made languages optional at age 14+ since.

Table 1 summarizes the general characteristics of the four schools. Academic and social descriptors of state schools 1 and 2 are similar: both are popular with and made all children except for 5-7% of lowest ability study a language up to age 16. Unlike school 1, school 2 controls its admissions. Schools 1 and 2 achieve above national average on key performance indicators and have below average percentages of students entitled to free school meals. The reverse is the case for school 3, set in a former mining town with high unemployment, with a high percentage of students entitled to free school meals, and a high percentage of students with special educational needs, and below national average academic performance. This school is undersubscribed, and in strong competition with a better performing nearby Academy. School 4 is a high-performing private school in a Senior Management all coastal town, without strong competition from other private schools. No official socio-economic descriptors are available for this cohort, but high fees exclude all but middle-class background students. Schools 1, 2 and 4 make study of a language compulsory for most students up to age 16; schools 1 and 2 make most 11-14 year olds learn two languages and offer several languages; in school 3, students aged 11-14 are offered one language only, which most drop aged 14+.

A qualitative approach was used to elicit motivational and attitudinal statements, and to investigate interrelations between these and socio-demographic and school policy variables. Interviews and focus groups were structured around pre-formulated questions (Appendices 1 & 2), encouraging spontaneity and free student interaction. Data was audio recorded and orthographically transcribed. NVivo was used for coding and analysis. For the coding process, an ‘emergent integrative framework which encapsulates the fullest possible diversity of categories and properties’ was adopted, involving constant comparison of coding and analysis (Glaser / Strauss 1967). Bar charts displaying coding frequencies were created, for the three stakeholder groups and four schools.

**Results: Research question 1**

**Graph I: Senior Management: topic frequencies by school**

As is evident in graph 1, Senior Management are mostly concerned with rationales for teaching ML that relate to improving overall academic performance, but also on fostering cultural under-standing. They mostly referred to wider, even global rationales for teaching ML, but also debate the difficulties of implementing good ML provision. Despite this, Senior Management, first and foremost the Senior Management of school 3, had visions for a place for ML in education that go far beyond what they currently offer: they frequently mention the potential of ML, for instance, to help students ‘learn how to learn’ (Harris 2008), and to foster intercultural awareness (=awareness of differences between own culture and that of others, see e.g. Tomalin / Stempleski 2013). School 3’s Senior Management crystallised this vision in his slogan (mentioned eight times in the interview) ‘*instil the love of learning*’; however, he admits failure to deliver on this, as he sees the school obliged to ‘teach to the exam’.

**Graph II: Teachers: topic frequency by school**

Teachers mentioned rationales relating to cultural understanding, tolerance and respect with the greatest frequency, but expanded much more on non-utilitarian rationales, such as fostering cognitive development and linguistic awareness.Teachers also expressed sharp criticism of national policy, and, with the exception of school 3’s teacher, were broadly supportive of their own school’s policy. Like Senior Management, they expressed acute awareness of the gap between what languages *could* offer and the current ‘teaching to exams’ maxim, but most teachers described their own teaching as somewhat non-compliant with this maxim.

**Graph III Students: topic frequencies by school**

Students see the reason for any language study first and foremost in terms of the professional and (to a lesser extent) educational advantages that language skills offer. However, beyond this, they offer an impressive range of rationales, frequently mentioning cultural enrichment and respect towards other cultures. Although they did profess to dis-liking some classroom activities, they also shared many innovative and exciting ideas concerning language pedagogy (from learning ‘*with Google translate glasses on*’, to ‘*obligatory stay abroad*’), suggesting that students do have an appetite for language learning, but perhaps not the activities currently offered in ML classes.

Overall, teachers mentioned the widest spectrum of rationales for learning languages, and cited a wide range of challenges in language teaching: severe marking, exam-focused curricula, and lack of Senior Management support; they also deliberated more on the problem of finding rationales for languages, in the context of Global English, and referred to the inward-looking, monolingual culture in their region, aggravating the problem of ‘selling’ languages to students. Senior Management expressed the tension between non-language-specific rationales for language learning, crystallised in the phrase ‘*instil the love of learning*’, and their need to ‘teach to exams’, and also somewhat blamed teachers for uninspiring teaching. Students strongly focused on skills use, and thus spent a great deal of time speculating as to which language would yield most benefit. However, they expressed very keen awareness of the ‘respect and tolerance’ rationale for learning ML. The global spread of English did not emerge as a very strong de-motivator.

**Results: Research question 2**

The largest school differences were observed among Senior Management: for instance, Senior Management in school 3 emphasised generic educational benefits (developing learning skills, cognitive benefits); by contrast, the Senior Management of school 4 (private school) referred frequently to the usefulness of language qualifications for the students’ academic careers. Regarding teachers, the school 3 teacher evoked the most negative topics, and felt the largest discrepancy between what kind of ML teacher they would like to be, and what they currently did. Among students, it was noticeable that those in private school had the fewest negative comments to make about language learning, and school 3 students complained the most about the poor ML provision in their school: it seemed a more popular subject than, for instance, in school 1 (with compulsory ML for all up to age 16), where more students said they disliked the subject and found it hard. Overall, however, student differences between schools were much less pronounced than staff differences.

**Conclusion**

The strong differences, among Senior Management, in rating the place of ML in education can clearly be linked to the different schools’ socio-economic status and academic credentials. For instance, Senior Management (and teachers, albeit to a lesser extent) from well-performing schools mentioned the ‘educational qualification’ argument: this rationale was explicitly rejected by both Senior Management and the teacher of school 3, a relatively poorly performing school with a more socially disadvantaged intake.

It was noticeable that school 3 students, unlike those from the other schools, did mention the benefits of languages for travel, most likely because of lack of funds to travel abroad. Beyond this, however, the students’ thinking about ML showed much less school difference than that of their staff. Students in all schools valued the ‘cultural enrichment’ and ‘showing respect’ rationales, and had imaginative ideas about improving language pedagogy. The teachers had less to say on the subject. Thus, this study, along with Grenfell / Harris (2013), found very little attitudinal difference towards languages that might relate to schools’ socio-economic status intake, in stark contrast to students’ actual opportunities for language study, which is sharply divided along socio-economic status (see above).

Educational management has been known to translate curriculum and policy in a different, often more results-focused manner than might have been intended by policy developers (Wang 2010). This observation seems to apply to the provision of ML at school level in today’s English secondary schools. Senior Management might have innovative and holistic visions for ML teaching, but, in the end, their decisions about school policy with regard to ML are determined by ‘League Table’ pressures on the one hand, and perceived utilitarian benefits (educational qualifications, professional skills) for their students on the other. When applying these criteria, Senior Management tend to frame students from lower socio-economic status as gaining little from ML. The private school staff, by contrast, referred to utilitarian benefits such as travel abroad, qualifications for university applications, and professional use of languages.

By contrast, students in all schools, regardless of their school’s socio-economic status, express visions and rationales that go far beyond the utilitarian arguments that are usually proposed to them in an effort to raise motivation. These young learners from very varied socio-economic status backgrounds expressed a willingness to share in the ‘burden of language learning’ and showed curiosity towards ‘otherness’; in other words, they possess (at least some) ‘international posture’ (Yashima 2009).

This study has deepened our understanding of the mechanisms that lead to this segregation, starkly evidenced in the latest Language Trends report (Board / Tinsley 2015). The combination of

* devolution at school level
* ‘League Table’ pressures, and
* lack of direction for ML in education

have created a context which compels schools to adopt ML policies that reinforce social segregation. As the power to determine who learns languages, and to what level, lies increasingly with Senior Management, students who happen to attend schools with a low socio-economic status mix are likely to have their aspirations for any language study curtailed, whether they like it or not. As a consequence, socio-economic status, already a strong predictor of a student’s general academic performance (Hartas 2011), becomes the strongest predictor for the study of languages.

Language education in the UK today is facing a challenge that is –in principle-common to all learners, namely Global English. Strong visions for the purposes of ML, coupled with strong education policies, could overcome these challenges, but the political agenda of devolution suggests the opposite trend. Judging by the outcome of this sociolinguistic study, the future of language learning at any higher skills level in the UK will increasingly lie with a privileged minority only.

**Limitations**

This study was conducted in three schools, in towns and one village in a dominantly ‘white’ area of Northern England. Students, although representing the full spectrum of ability, were randomly selected for participation. Outcomes might differ in different settings (e.g. more ethnical diversity, different student mix), or with different language education policies.

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1. And Latin, in one school. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The percentage of a schools’ cohort entitled to free school meals is deemed a reliable indicator of the relative social deprivation of a school’s intake, see Board / Tinsley 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. County not named to protect anonymity of schools [↑](#footnote-ref-3)