What Should a National Strategy for Languages Mean? – Why, What and How

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1. Introduction

In 2020 the British Academy and other key stakeholders published a document, *Towards a national languages strategy: education and skills.*[1] The overarching objective of this strategy is to increase the number of individuals engaging in language learning and developing their language skills. This would also then address and reverse the decline in the number of students registering, especially for language courses in secondary school and university across the UK. However, developing a strategy from within the discipline will prove a very complex task, not least due to the inherent fragmentation of the discipline, by sector (primary, secondary, HE), by language, and between research and the established hierarchical relationship between language and 'culture'. This has led to a situation where there are many individual vested interests that in theory have a common cause, but which in practice rarely operate in concert. Therefore, in order to develop a coherent strategy, and without external government support being forthcoming in this particular moment, we need to be able to find a way in which we can coordinate the disparate interest groups within the academic discipline addressing languages, cultures and societies towards a common agenda for change.

Furthermore, the discipline at the university level remains largely designed around a Euro-centric view of the world, despite recent initiatives towards decolonisation. The teaching of French, German and Spanish predominates in the UK, and policies inevitably become designed to protect interests in those language groups, not least when it comes to research. This means that the development of programmes in other major world languages - Arabic and Chinese for example - is consistently made difficult. Furthermore, whilst initiatives to encourage work across languages and cultures, in transnationalism, and through named undergraduate degree programmes in 'Modern Languages & Cultures' (and variations thereof), the application of resources remains firmly pigeon-holed, further establishing hierarchies and competition between languages for increasingly scarce resources. In effect the discipline risks being its' own worst enemy in its' strategic approach to the management of capacity to support and grow our own programmes.

The discipline would benefit from a more flexible approach to the study of languages, cultures and societies that better reflects the world as it is today: a world that is more fluid, with more interaction across borders and between nationalities. This shapes how we need to engage with the world linguistically and culturally in the future, and therefore shapes how we might re-define the link between education and culture, especially where cultures come into contact, collide and combine (be it the growth of Spanish and wider multilingualism in America, or the example of home, heritage and community languages in the UK). Considering the often multilingual and multicultural environments

[1] The British Academy, 2020

in which many of us live, is it therefore the case that the current structures and focus of the languages discipline are themselves putting younger people off when it comes to the more comprehensive study of languages, cultures and societies if the offer does not fully match the need or the demand?

2. The Challenge

Coming back to the UK national languages strategy, the fundamental challenge that we seek to address is the decline in uptake of language learning at various key education transitions, including GCSE (and Nat5 in Scotland), at A-level (and Higher/Advanced Higher), and at degree level in higher education. There has been a narrative of decline now for several decades, and in 2025 the future of the discipline is as precarious as it has been for many years. However, the discipline has rarely succeeded in making the case as to its real value; and specifically ***why*** we need to reverse the decline in numbers of language learners in formal education programmes, ***how many learners*** we then need to be viable, and in the study of ***which languages***. To reverse the current trend of declining registrations and programme closures, it will require a coordination of policy across the discipline and across universities, with strategic objectives and targets. This may not be dissimilar to the approach taken in the UK in previous decades of the mid-20th century, when government agencies often advised on the numbers and locations of language programmes to address particular policy priorities of the time. Alongside this, however, are also some fundamental challenges that the discipline needs to address. These include the role of artificial intelligence and machine learning, be it via apps and software for language learning, or for automated translation and interpreting. This article will reflect on four important aspects for the discipline to consider in developing a new national languages strategy:

- The perceived requirements
- The need to embrace technology
- The evolving role and identity of language teachers
- The imperative for coordination and collaboration across the discipline

Currently in the UK, the main metric used to monitor the health of the discipline is the number of enrolments for either school-based examinations or registrations to university teaching programmes. Success in the former directly influences the health of the latter. According to Ofqual,[2] the majority of students registering for GCSE and A-level (in England) do so in French & Spanish: 77.0% at GCSE, and 63.3% at A-level. German accounts for a further 10% at each level. It is interesting to note that whilst 'other' languages account for 12.5% at GCSE, this rises to 26.9% at A-level,[3] and the number of registrations for A-level in languages from Chinese to Panjabi has increased 30% between 2020-2024. Yet there remains a tendency to dismiss A-levels in some languages, with the majority of registrations likely to be from heritage learners or speakers. For this reason, at this time, not all language A-levels are accepted for university entry.

French, German and, in recent decades, Spanish generally predominate for what appear to be three main reasons. There is obviously the proximity of Europe to the UK, and the historical, political and

[2] Ofqual, 2024
[3] Joint Council for Qualifications, 2024

cultural relations between the UK and our near neighbours that meant the development of proficiency in these languages was useful for the UK. In turn, the depth of cultural material available to study in those languages is high, with an especially strong historical literary canon that is easily accessible both in the original and in translation. Finally, with the development of teaching and research programmes in those languages, the development of researchers and educators in those languages will inevitably perpetuate the teaching and study of those same languages. This has all led to a very strong academic tradition that continues to generate huge value. However, the investment that has been made in developing this rich base in those languages inevitably continues to demand the lion's share of resources. As of July 2024,[4] numbers of UK Universities offering selected languages as part of degree programmes were:

Table 1. Number of UKHE Institutions Offering Programmes in Certain Languages

	As part of a degree	With language and content	As part of a university-wide language programme
French	54	41	62
German	44	35	56
Spanish	56	42	62
Arabic	16	12	53
Chinese	23	23	59
Korean	8	4	25

This describes the situation in formal education. How does this compare with the perceived 'need' for trained linguists? In 2017 the British Council[5] published an updated report 'Languages for the Future'. This highlighted the priority language needs of the UK based on a number of criteria including business & trade, diplomacy, security and tourism. Without indicating volume, this report highlighted the top 10 most important languages as, in perceived order of priority, Spanish, Chinese, French, Arabic, German, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese and Russian. The report notes some changes towards the end of this list, with Turkish, Korean, Hindi and other languages also being significant. However, as the table above indicates, formal education programmes are not fully representative of, nor do they potentially address, the stated need. Nevertheless, they do represent an indication of capacity.

A third important indicator beyond capacity and need is that of interest. This can be judged better perhaps, not by enrolments in formal programmes, but by enrolments in informal programmes. There are many ways to consider this, but one with available data relates to sign-ups to the independent app Duolingo (noting that many other learning programmes are available). Detailed information for the UK is difficult to source, but the most popular languages to learn amongst first-language English speakers

[4] Survey undertaken by AULC & UCFL, to be published 2025
[5] British Council, 2017

are: Spanish, French, Japanese, Korean, German, Italian, Hindi, Chinese, Russian and Arabic.[6] Expressed learner motivation with Duolingo is dominated by personal preferences, and these do not align closely with the stated needs of the British Council report. However, this does give a clear sense of the interests of language learners going forward, and hence also demand. In summary, we can then compare the perceived priorities for language learning between capacity, need, and demand:

Table 2. Priority Languages According to the Given Criteria

Capacity (degree level, language/language & content)	Need	Demand
Spanish	Spanish	Spanish
French	Chinese	French
German	French	Japanese
Chinese	Arabic	Korean
Italian	German	German
Japanese	Italian	Italian
Portuguese	Dutch	Hindi
Russian	Portuguese	Chinese
Arabic	Japanese	Russian
Korean	Russian	Arabic

In summary, in relation to which languages we need to offer in schools and universities, the picture is confused. Clearly Spanish and French are significant. However, the relative merits of programmes in Arabic and Chinese, and the wider capacity to deliver on a portfolio of languages is important to maintain at a time when the very structure and existence of academic departments is so much in question.

3. Supply and Demand

The matter of capacity and demand is one that is most prominent in the minds of programme managers. Demand for formal language education programmes has been declining for decades, yet demand for language skills is rising. This can be seen via take up of institution-wide language programmes (as indicated in Table 1) and of independent learning. This reduction in demand for formal education has also led to a fall in capacity as programmes are either scaled back or closed altogether, and this is particularly evident at present in German. This has inevitably led to a cyclical pattern where demand and capacity are both falling, and where one feeds the other.

[6] Duolingo, 2024

So is it the case that learner demand for language education can be satisfied through better use of technology? The early response of the languages discipline to the rise of apps and generative artificial intelligence has frequently been to perceive these as respectively irrelevant and as a threat. There are some highly creative approaches being adopted to successfully integrate the use of generative AI (for example) in classroom-based language teaching, yet this remains at a largely individual level according to the skills and interests of the teacher, and the discipline has yet to develop a strategic approach. There is a sense, from outside the practice of language teaching, that the classroom teaching of languages remains very traditional, teacher-led, grammar-focused, and focused on accuracy ahead of communicative effectiveness, something that is recognised to require hundreds of, if not thousands of hours of study to achieve proficiency. On the contrary, apps and online self-study programmes encourage assimilative acquisition, and getting one's message across can now be more easily achieved through certain online translation tools. Few would dispute that a language learner will learn best with a teacher, or within an immersive environment where they are continuously confronted with their new language. But the case for investment in formal programmes is proving increasingly hard to make when language tools are so prevalent, accessible and, frankly, cheap. Even within the discipline, this offers an incentive to see opportunities to cut costs by reducing language teaching capacity in an attempt to prioritise resources for other activities.

Language teaching, especially at university, will inevitably need to change if it is to survive, and programmes will inevitably need to embrace technology-enhanced language learning much more than they are currently doing. The identity of language teachers will also need to evolve. Digitally proficient and culturally sensitive, language teachers do more than 'just' teach languages, in the same way that language programmes deliver much, much more than 'just' language proficiency. Yet as educators, language teachers are amongst the least valued. With a history of educating tens of thousands of university graduates each year in the UK, we promote graduate access to a range of professions and vocations, but few programmes explicitly encourage graduates to consider a career in language teaching. We develop academic researchers, of course. But as a discipline, we have ourselves allowed myths to perpetuate that any native language speaker can teach a language. We have frequently recruited language teachers from outside the UK, outsourcing due to the lack of domestic skills. In parallel it can be observed that the training of future language teachers within the UK has largely been delegated to others. A short review of 47 advertised postgraduate teacher training programmes in languages reveals an interesting picture.[7] Of the 56 universities offering degrees in French or Spanish, only 26 of them (46%) offer a teacher training programme for language teachers. Meanwhile 21 of the 47 (45%) university PGCE programmes in modern languages are delivered in universities that do not themselves offer other degree programmes in languages. Are we comfortable, as a discipline, that fewer than half of universities offering degrees in languages offer teacher training routes, and that close to half of language teacher training programmes are delivered by universities that themselves do not offer language degree programmes? Barring the specialist language teacher training centres such as St Mary's Twickenham, this would seem nonsensical. Furthermore, with PGCE programmes delivered universally by academic Schools of Education, languages departments have effectively largely abrogated responsibility for language teacher training, and rarely indicate any form of close

[7] UCAS, 2024

relationship. It is almost as if the discipline were disinterested in the development of the very teachers that we then depend on to support the pipeline of education from schools to universities. Is this a reason why we now see a situation where PGCE language teacher training places go unfilled, compounding the very problems we seem to address nationally with balancing capacity and demand? The majority of PGCE places (PGDE in Scotland) also remain in French, German and Spanish. There appear to be four universities offering PGCE in Chinese, two in Arabic, and one in Japanese. This implies and sustains a lack of capacity to develop teachers in what may be perceived as other priority languages, thereby cementing the predominance of only three of the global languages we perceive to be important to the UK (see Table 2), and reinforcing the existing language hierarchies and politics within our wider discipline.

4. Institution-wide Language Programmes

It is important to reaffirm positivity towards language learning - not everything is doom and gloom. Whilst numbers of registrations to traditional GCSE, A-level and university degree programmes may continue to be falling, clearly there is interest and demand for language acquisition across the country, evidenced by less formalised education programmes, including university-wide language programmes and independent study. At a time when many colleagues working across the discipline feel under threat, with departments being closed and language programmes being hollowed out, it is ever more important that all of us within the discipline come together, pull together, and re-think a new vision for the subject that we all treasure so much.

An understanding of languages, societies and cultures is vitally important to the success of the UK. Within the discipline we all know that reliance on English is not enough, and that linguistic and cultural sensitivity and agility is a vital skill for everyone. Nevertheless, it is possible to contend that the problems we face are to an extent of our own making, and the solutions are within our grasp. For all the benefits of external bodies such as all-party parliamentary groups, business groups, funding agencies, and cultural institutes, the solutions are ours to find and ours to make, they will not come from outside. The academic discipline has conventionally been founded on the aggregation of groups of lone scholars into departments. Everyone inevitably prioritises their own interests, and perhaps this reinforces the status quo. To effect the change that is certainly required, collaboration towards policy is ever more important, and it is time for a national conversation about the future direction of the languages discipline. The proposed national languages strategy is a vehicle that can help us achieve this, alongside such tools as The Languages Gateway. Whilst this article describes some of the challenges that face us, this is more a call for action to the academic discipline in line with a new manifesto for languages that will require:

- Close collaboration across the discipline from school to university and beyond. Coordination across the whole pipeline is required.
- Coordination between university departments. A solution has to be national and can never succeed if only addressed locally.

- A re-think of the shape of the discipline in terms of the priority languages we offer, expanding beyond the traditional European languages that otherwise dominate too much.
- A re-think about how we teach languages, embracing technology to do so.
- A re-think about how to engage with heritage and independent learners, as well as those in formal education towards common goals.
- A re-think about who we teach languages to, why, in which languages, and how many.
- A coordinated plan to sustain minimum teaching capacity levels across universities to ensure we can continue to teach the languages we require to sufficient students.
- A long-term plan for teacher training at the school and university level that is embraced by language departments.

To do this, the discipline needs to effectively engage with the existing networks including the University Council for Languages, the Association of University Language Communities, the Association for Language Learning, and the initiative that is The Languages Gateway. Our challenges as a discipline will not be solved for us by others. We have to address this ourselves. To do this we need to recognise and put aside parochial self-interests that perpetuate, and collectively respect, value and embrace the whole discipline from schools to universities, from research to teaching, from Arabic to Welsh and all languages in between. In this way, the value of the academic study of languages, cultures and societies can demonstrate its intrinsic value to the social, cultural, professional and political future of the United Kingdom.

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