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## The UK's future in Europe: what role can schools and language learning play?

8 May 2019, 09.00-11.30, IPU Room, Houses of Parliament

### Attendees:

Benoît Le Dévédec, French Language Attaché, Institut Français  
Bernadette Holmes, Campaign Director, Speak to the Future  
Bobbie Mills, Senior Researcher, School System and Performance, Education Policy Institute  
Emma Skelton, Policy and Parliamentary Affairs Adviser, British Council  
Janet Lloyd, Managing Director, Primary Languages Network  
Jesus Hernandez-Gonzalez, Education Advisor, Spanish Embassy  
Joanna Speak, Headteacher, Poplars Farm Primary School  
John Baron MP, Chair, British Council APPG  
Katharina Von Ruckteschell, Director, Goethe  
Katrin Kohl, Professor of German Literature, University of Oxford  
Lord Watson, Shadow Education Minister, House of Lords  
Louise Glen, Senior Education Officer, Education Scotland  
Mara Luongo, Education Director, Italian Consulate  
Mark Herbert, Head of Schools Programmes, British Council  
Melike Berker, Policy and Parliamentary Affairs Adviser, British Council  
Richard Hardie, UBS & Vice President, CIOL  
Sarah Breslin, ED, European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe  
Simon Spry, Headteacher, Prince Rock Primary School  
Susanne Frane, Deputy Head of Culture and Education, German Embassy  
Vicky Gough, Schools Advisor, British Council  
Wendy Ayres-Bennett, Professor of French Philology and Linguistics, University of Cambridge  
Wera Hobhouse MP, House of Commons

The wide-ranging discussion covered international collaboration between schools, school exchanges, language learning at primary and secondary level, grading and teaching methods, international education for the disadvantaged, teacher recruitment and retention, and the role of cultural institutes and embassies.

Participants agreed that international exchange between schools and learning European languages in schools had been, and will be, important for the UK's relationship with Europe.

In the future, participants recommended that the UK:

- Increases physical and digital student and pupil exchanges with Europe
- Enables cultural institutes to have high-level strategic partnerships with the UK in areas such as teacher recruitment and the promotion on European languages
- Develops clear priorities to support recruitment, retention and time allocation for language learning in schools
- Includes languages as part of the skills/vocational education agenda
- Explores use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to simplify grading and teaching ensure pupils gain practical language skills
- Ensures access to modern languages assistants for all students to improve the quality and confidence of spoken language
- Maintains and increases joint projects with other European schools across the curriculum
- Encourages and facilitates extended periods of residency in Europe for pupils
- Preserves Erasmus+ as a vehicle for school and teacher exchange and collaboration



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## International Collaboration and languages

Participants agreed that language learning and international collaboration between schools was an important part of the UK's relationship with other European countries, particularly forging a relationship between pupils and teachers and fostering a positive impression of the UK.

Other benefits were also cited, such as increased soft skills, communication, increased academic achievement in other subjects, and increased global awareness, which are important for businesses. Participants agreed that international collaboration was vital to prepare pupils for an increasingly globalised world. One participant cited research undertaken with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Employer Education Task Force which concluded that languages were in demand from businesses and businesses should play a part in encouraging their take-up.

Several participants saw languages as a vital skill, and one questioned why they were not prioritised as part of the skills agenda or the Industrial Strategy. Those representing other European countries argued that we all want a multilingual Europe. It was argued that learning languages was linked to better general attainment. It was stated that in Welsh bilingual schools there is better achievement across the board than in monolingual schools.

## Exchanges

All participants argued for the importance of exchanges both for the pupils' education and development and for our relationship with Europe. The importance of meeting native speakers was mentioned, especially hosting language assistants in schools, as they become ambassadors of their country and culture and motivate pupils to learn the language. UK-German Connection was given as an example of a successful bilateral exchange.

Erasmus+ was hailed by the group as an important mechanism for school exchange, both for teacher and pupil, and something to be kept. Participants thought it was important that it was not confined to modern languages, and pupils can take part in joint projects across the curriculum. The focus is therefore on cultural exchange, and on meaning-making rather than the minutiae of grammar. It is important to have native speakers in the classroom too.

One participant outlined their experience of Erasmus+ teacher exchanges with Cyprus, Romania, Turkey, Greece and Finland. They described it as 'the best continued professional development' they could offer, and said it helped enormously with teacher retention. However, the administrative burden of applying for Erasmus+ was raised, with some schools hiring outside companies to fill in the paperwork for them. This was not the case in Scotland, where Local Authority representatives assist with applications.

It was argued that exchanges were not always possible as the UK safeguarding legislation has made it more difficult for UK schools to take part in physical exchanges. In addition, pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to take part in mobility programs. 'Internationalism at home', including digital exchanges, joint projects and partnerships were offered as a possible alternative to physical exchanges, but it was agreed that mobility was the most effective exchange. The Goethe Institut are developing digital platforms for German, thus offering alternatives to physical exchanges.

## The role of cultural institutes

There were representatives from several cultural institutes present. They were keen to promote their languages and work with the UK to promote modern foreign language learning



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and suggested they could play a part in this and in teacher training, retention and recruitment. Many of them said they had funding available and would like to use it to mutual effect.

Several of them spoke about the difficulties they had navigating the UK system and the difficulties they had in contacting anyone centrally or regionally to speak about a co-ordinated effort. They often had to approach headteachers directly and were unable to form more strategic partnerships. A British participant referred to the UK system as fragmented and dysfunctional and argued that this had had detrimental effects making it harder to collaborate with cultural institutes but also with other schools, who often compete rather than collaborate.

One participant recommended that other cultural institutes use the Confucius Institute as the model. The participant had personal experience of working with them and said the money and support for teaching Mandarin was easy to access. Another participant suggested working through EUNIC to better co-ordinate cultural institutes in the UK, so that they could provide more support to cultural institutes in the UK. It should be noted that the UK may not be able to continue as a member of EUNIC once the UK leaves the EU.

### **Languages at Primary level**

All participants agreed that language learning should start at primary level as a minimum, if not at nursery level. According to those present, young children have a 'natural fascination for languages' at that age and become increasingly self-conscious with age, thus hindering language learning and confidence in speaking.

It was agreed that the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) had made progress, as we now have a statutory requirement to teach modern foreign languages in primary schools for the first time. All participants agreed that in order to see real progress and to reach a desired level, more time is needed to be allocated in the curriculum. Although the group agreed that progress had been made, it was argued that with less than an hour a week it was impossible to develop meaningful schemes of work.

Spain was given as a case study. In Spain modern foreign languages are core subjects equal to STEM. Time is allocated accordingly, and pupils have at least 3 hours a week either of language lessons or other lessons taught in the foreign language. They have followed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages since 2001 and have found this incredibly useful. It was suggested that the UK should use this model.

Teacher recruitment and retention was also raised several times as an issue in primary education, and given recent cuts to primary school budgets, peripatetic language teachers were some of the first things to be cut. One participant gave Scotland as an example of an alternative approach to teacher recruitment and retention. In 2011 they started a new project with a 10-year lead-in time, where existing primary school teachers are upskilled and given the tools to teach modern languages. They are given online resources and other training, based on the model of Gaelic medium education, which has been very successful.

### **Languages at secondary level**

The English Baccalaureate (EBACC) was generally welcomed by the group. However, a concern was raised over languages being non-compulsory. As languages were perceived as difficult, they were often dropped. The 75% target for pupils taking modern foreign languages at GCSE in England was welcomed, but there was some concern as to how this could be achieved.

One participant said that 'rocket fuel' would need to be put into teacher training programmes to overcome the teacher shortage in this area. One participant suggested this could



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temporarily be filled by native speakers, but in the long term we would need non-native teachers as well. This would require more pupils taking languages at all levels to ensure we have a supply of competent teachers in the future.

It was suggested by several members of the group that there was a need for more continuity in language learning to facilitate the transition between primary and secondary schools. In some areas a particular language is offered at primary and not at secondary. It was suggested that there should be central planning to ensure that the same languages were offered throughout a pupil's schooling. It was suggested Local Education Authorities (LEAs) could play a part in this, where they are active. Spain was given as a case study. In Spain it is compulsory for primary and secondary schools to offer the same languages.

There was a lively discussion about breadth versus depth of languages at secondary level. One participant argued it would be wise to have just one language per school at GCSE, rather than two, to ensure pupils achieved the right level of competency and avoid confusion. In terms of examinations, they should expect less in terms of vocabulary and more in terms of practical application and understanding of the basics. The participant gave the example of pupils being expected to speak about the environment in German, despite not being able or willing to speak about the subject in their native tongue. They argued it would be more useful to focus on practical application.

Participants agreed that there is a need for an implementation strategy with a clear vision. It was argued that we need the requisite teacher preparation and continued professional development in order to reach the goals that we've set in terms of language acquisition. More specifically, one individual argued for extra funding in the Comprehensive Spending Review for languages with clear priorities to support recruitment, retention and time allocation for languages.

### **Grading and teaching methods**

There was some debate around grades and grading for modern foreign languages. One participant was highly critical of the way exams are designed in the UK. They had studied German A level exam papers and concluded that it was not a realistic level for students to reach and was not co-ordinated enough. In contrast, for a B1 level<sup>1</sup> Goethe Institut Exam (similar level to an A-level), there is a list of 2400 words set of grammatical structures that exam-takers are expected to understand and use. The UK doesn't follow this plan which means exam-takers could be presented with an array of vocabulary which is not useful or common and are expected to understand it.

In terms of remedying this, the participant suggested that we should look at what is realistic and useful for non-native speakers, and radically simplify the exam accordingly. There are for example currently 11 texts, which this should be cut to 5 as a maximum. The exam should concentrate on whether basic vocabulary and structures are correct and met before progressing to wider vocabulary. This means that pupils would leave with a useful skill and could negotiate basic structures and vocabulary. There was also a suggestion that languages should be chunked into small, achievable goals, and that following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages would be an ideal way to do this. They stressed this was not 'dumbing down' but 'chunking' to ensure pupils have more practical application of the language.

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<sup>1</sup> Common European Framework of Reference for Languages  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_European\\_Framework\\_of\\_Reference\\_for\\_Languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages)



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## Encouraging Language Learning

Several participants argued that languages are perceived as difficult in the UK, and this, coupled with the fact that they are not compulsory, led to a low uptake of languages. One mentioned a recent news story that linked language learning to mental health difficulties. One participant mentioned that more girls study languages than boys in England. Languages are both seen as 'difficult' subjects and 'female'. This was agreed to be the case in Scotland too. In the European countries languages were compulsory in school so there was no gender divide in terms of take-up. However, more girls took it up for further study than boys in Germany.

It was suggested that Modern Foreign Language practitioners could learn from schemes used to encourage girls into STEM to encourage more uptake by boys and girls of modern foreign languages. The Cheltenham Festival, which encourages girls to study science in collaboration with local employers, was given as an example of good practice. Another example of good practice was collaboration between Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ), schools and local businesses to encourage pupils to learn to code. Languages should be seen as a relevant skill and including employers in their promotion would make them relevant.

One participant suggested that Initial Teacher Training (ITT) & Continuing Professional Development (CPD) should have a compulsory language element to encourage teachers to promote language-learning in their schools. It was mentioned that less advantaged schools were less likely to take up languages, to take part in exchanges and to have a native-speaking language assistant, but it would be important to target pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds to take up languages, given their benefits as outlined above.

### The future

When asked what they would like to see in the future, the main asks were access to foreign modern language assistants for all students, access to international experience and virtual networks, joint projects with other European schools across the curriculum, access to work experience abroad and more extended periods of residency abroad, and to preserve Erasmus+. The group agreed that in order to achieve all of these, a reprioritisation of funding would be needed.

There was also a call from one participant for the depoliticization of the learning of languages – it should be removed from the discussion of whether we are leaving the EU and moved into the skills agenda. The cultural institutes would like to work together with the UK and have advice on who to speak to at a higher level to create strategic partnerships to address issues such as teacher recruitment and retention, and the teaching of modern foreign languages.