

Links into Languages North East teachers conference  
***Realising the Strategic Importance of Languages***  
Royal Station Hotel, Newcastle upon Tyne, 11 January 2011

**Keynote speech: Baroness Coussins**

Thank you very much for inviting me and for giving me the opportunity to come back to the north east, where I spent large chunks of my childhood.

I'm assuming we're all pretty like-minded here when it comes to the importance of languages so I shan't be doing any preaching to the converted, but I hope that what I can do in the time available is perhaps provide you with some helpful facts, figures, bullet points and lines to take for when you're fighting the good fight with less well informed colleagues, parents or students.

Many of you here are probably familiar with the publication by Southampton University's Languages and Linguistics Centre, called 'Seven Hundred reasons for studying languages'. Well you'll be relieved to hear that I don't intend to work my way through all 700 reasons this morning, but here are three of the reasons all given by sixth formers to this survey, and they sum it up pretty well.

One said 'Languages are your best asset'. Another said 'Because it's polite. We shouldn't expect other people to be able to speak English'. And another said 'It's fun and not too difficult'.

Unfortunately not everyone sees it that way and modern languages finally hit the headlines in a negative way last summer. The tipping point was reached when French disappeared from the top ten GCSE subjects for the first time ever, when A-level entries dropped, when university departments began to anticipate the cuts by planning reductions in

modern language courses and, to cap it all, when schools and local authorities realised that despite years of investment languages were no longer to be made compulsory in primary schools.

This bleak picture was compounded by the publication in September of an OECD survey which showed that secondary school pupils in the UK spend less time studying languages than anywhere else in the developed world. Only 7 per cent of the lesson time of 12-14 year olds is allocated to languages, which is half the amount of time spent on sciences. This puts England joint bottom of a table of 39 countries, alongside Ireland and Estonia and behind Indonesia and Mexico.

Professor Michael Worton came to a very stark conclusion in his review of modern language provision in English universities. He said that unless the decline in modern language learning is reversed, Anglophone Britons will become one of the most monolingual peoples in the world, with severe consequences for our economy, for business competitiveness, for international reputation and mobility and for community cohesion at home.

English is one of the great world languages and we benefit enormously from the desire and willingness to learn it on the part of so many other people – as do they. But its prevalence should not be overestimated. Only six per cent of the global population are native English speakers and 75 per cent speak no English at all. 75% are multilingual and they're the ones who will get better-paid jobs, run more successful businesses and generally be more likely to win friends and influence people than complacent monoglot Brits.

One telling indicator of the relative influence of English is its declining share of internet traffic. English material on the web has fallen from 51 per cent in the year 2000 to only 29 per cent in 2009. In the same period,

the amount of material in Chinese rose from only 5 per cent to 20 per cent.

A great deal of evidence shows that the operational language needs of employers are not being met and I'm sure Richard will be saying more about this, so I won't dwell on it for too long. But we are doing serious damage not only to the competitiveness of UK businesses, but also to the employment chances of our young people in a global labour market.

Sixty per cent of employers say they are dissatisfied with the foreign language skills of school leavers. And I should perhaps say at this point that there is plenty of evidence to show that learning a foreign language greatly improves written and spoken English too.

Over a third of UK businesses wants people specifically for their language skills but increasingly are forced to recruit overseas to meet their needs.

French and German are top of their wish list , but as new markets open up in the Far East, Central Asia and Latin America, significant numbers also want Mandarin or Cantonese, Spanish, Russian and Arabic.

Most employers don't require complete fluency. They want conversational ability which will give a good impression, help to build relationships and make new contacts. Basic language competence is important for retailers, secretaries, receptionists, marketeers, transport and healthcare workers and many, many others.

But in addition to the business case, knowledge of other people's languages opens doors to understanding other people's cultures. And competence in languages provides us with the wherewithal to function in international institutions and participate in research. The UK's capacity in all these areas is now dangerously low and we will suffer serious

commercial and cultural damage unless we inject a new urgency and commitment into our national approach to learning languages. Much cutting edge research, for example on climate change or counter-terrorism, is by definition international and comparative. Graduates from the US, China, India and other EU countries are more likely to have a language, or two, in addition to their main subject, whether that be law, chemistry, geography or economics.

The forthcoming review of the National Curriculum means the timing is right for nothing less than a national languages recovery programme.

First, we must begin to put right the disastrous consequences of the policy to make languages optional at Key Stage 4. The decline in GCSE entries from 2004 has been severe. The vast majority of state schools neither insist on a language post-14, nor even set a benchmark for take-up as they are in theory meant to do. As a result, languages have become one of the main causes of what the coalition government has called the 'vast gulf' between state and independent schools, with take-up at Key Stage 4 being 41% from comprehensives, compared to 81% from independent schools and 91% from all selective schools.

The reason for this decline would appear to be a combination of various factors. There is the ever-widening choice of subjects offered to students post-14, there's the pressure of performance league tables which affects the structure and content of the academic timetable, there are narrowly defined school policies, and lastly, there's bad advice. We have 'curriculum by league table' and the perverse impact of choice is actually limiting students' educational experience and reach. The last Languages Trends Survey even reported one school where languages are no longer being taught during the school day at Key Stage 4, but have become a so-called twilight subject. And what happened, predictably, was that although

11 students wanted to keep their languages on, only 4 of them were able to stay after school to do so. I'd call that educational vandalism.

I think the government's proposal for an English Baccalaureate is a very interesting way of exploiting the curriculum by league table approach by saying that extra credit will be given to schools for the number of pupils with good GCSE passes in a range of subjects including a language. The downside is that this is expected to account for only around 15% of children and I want them all to be benefiting from learning languages. I don't accept that languages are only for the top set or the bright ones. In Belgium and Holland every six year old can handle a couple of languages because that's the cultural norm.

Beneath the headline figures on take-up, though, I think it's important to dig for the details because the picture is not uniformly gloomy. German is in decline and so is French at Key Stage 4 (though not curiously, in the sixth form). But Spanish is growing and so are some of the lesser taught languages, particularly Mandarin. Arabic and Polish are also on the rise at GCSE. And at A-level, entries in Russian, Polish, Punjabi and Chinese are all up. We might at long last be seeing some of the diverse languages of our community reflected and acknowledged in academic take-up and achievement.

I don't believe it would be right to force every child to take a GCSE in a modern language, but I do believe very strongly indeed that it should be compulsory for every child to study at least one modern language until they are 16, at a level appropriate for them. Fortunately, the government doesn't need to re-invent the wheel to apply this model, because the Languages Ladder provides exactly that flexibility. This is a national recognition scheme to reward achievement in languages at all levels from beginners through to advanced and proficient language learners and it's calibrated against the Common European Framework.

I was encouraged to read recently that one of the major teacher unions, the NAS-UWT, has come out strongly in favour of compulsory languages at Key Stage 4. And some forward-looking schools are beginning to restrict access to the sixth form to those with a language GCSE, irrespective of A-level subject choice.

Another issue is the drift – or avalanche – into elitism for languages: nearly a quarter of acceptances for language degree courses are from independent school students, compared to only 9 per cent across all subjects. But at the moment, that gulf between state and independent schools is widening, not just in terms of the formal timetabled languages offer, but also in terms of the additional activity which enriches and encourages language learning, such as foreign trips and exchanges.

And what about primary schools? It's tragic that we had reached the point where 92% of primary schools were teaching languages to some extent in mainstream curriculum time, in anticipation of a statutory framework from 2011, only to discover that the pre-general election horse-trading between the parties had resulted in this longstanding commitment being abandoned. The risk now is that, without a statutory requirement, some schools and some LEAs will drop languages again. I am already hearing reports of LEA language advisers and consultants being laid off. And certainly if compulsory languages up to 16 aren't reinstated, many other primary schools will surely not think it worth investing in language teaching for their 7 year olds, only to send them to secondary school aged 11 where their achievement may not be valued or built on. This is another aspect of the national curriculum review which I think should get prominent attention and we should revert to Plan A.

Another thing the government needs to do is get the people who create the exam syllabuses to be more imaginative and more responsive to the

educational needs of children. If all you do for GCSE is more of what you've done between age 11 and 14, and that centres on endless description of what you did over the weekend, or listing your family members to an imaginary penfriend, no wonder that children are too bored to carry on with it. Research from Australia and from Scotland shows that children value and want to do subjects that are seen as serious, even if they find them hard. Too often, the relevance of languages is pitched to children in terms of sport or fashion or going on holiday. But the appeal which would hit home more effectively, as well as being more grounded educationally, would be the relevance and workings of grammar and the whole structure of language, including English, to the child's capacity for self-expression, intellectual challenge and understanding, in the context of a world where it will be a serious disadvantage to be monolingual, even if your one language is English.

I know the opposite end of the state school spectrum – where languages are valued, encouraged and resourced - is well-represented here today and I would urge you all to be as evangelical as possible in showing your less enlightened colleagues in other schools what a difference good leadership can make.

And if parents, teenagers and careers advisers do still need a positive message about languages, you could do worse than tell them about the finding of a survey of earnings three and a half years after graduation, which showed that modern linguists earn more than those from any other discipline except medics, architects and pharmacologists. A bit of enlightened self interest always comes in handy.

So to summarise what is really a cross between my wish list and a call to arms, I'd say

1. make sure your school's mission statement/policy explicitly includes something prominent and upfront about the value of



preparing children to be global citizens and the place of language competence and intercultural understanding within that framework.

2. have all pupils learning at least one foreign language until the end of KS4, whether they are going to do GCSE or not. Failing that, set an ambitious and progressive benchmark for take up and monitor it closely.
3. consider introducing a language requirement for 6<sup>th</sup> form entry
4. make sure you take account of university admission requirements when advising Year 9s on their GCSE option choices and building the timetable around them
5. make sure your timetable doesn't make it difficult or impossible to do two languages at GCSE or A level
6. make sure you let parents as well as their children how important languages are for higher education and future employment prospects
7. make the effort to maintain or start up a programme of foreign exchanges and visits
8. exploit all possible links with the language departments at local universities and with native speakers from academia and elsewhere.
9. and if you're really serious, can get the money and support and the staff, consider delivering a particular subject through the medium of another language. Art in Italian, Geography in Spanish, Music in French, any combination is possible and the evidence is that this total immersion approach can really pay off.



The STEM subjects have rightly attracted attention and strategic investment. Modern languages require the same declaration of priority and leadership.

I believe that every young person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need a measure of modern language competence, whether specialist and learned or basic and conversational, every bit as much as they will need IT skills, English and maths. If you really want to get under the skin of another culture, you need their language, not just a louder voice in your own. You could call it a utilitarian asset, but actually it's also the key to intercultural understanding, to the fun of participation, the pleasure of literary discovery and the gateway to a more civilised co-existence with other people.

Thank you and bonne chance.

Jean Coussins  
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This address was given on Tuesday, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011 as part of the event: Realising the Strategic Importance of Languages. Other documents and recordings of the day (photo, video and summary notes) are available at: [www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/events/2210](http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/events/2210)