

“All Aboard the Eurostar, but ‘Mind the Gap’...!”

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This article discusses the role of cross-sector collaboration in the promotion of foreign languages in Scotland, taking forward ideas highlighted in a presentation given at a national conference in November 2006. It considers the obstacles to foreign language learning during the transition from secondary school to university against a back-drop of serious decline in foreign languages uptake at ‘Higher’ grade in Scotland. The author cites the value of cross-sector initiatives such as the EuroAward winning Languages Work! conferences and highlights other collaboration and lobbying opportunities for linguists and non-linguists. It is argued that urgent action is required to ensure that a proper languages learning interface between secondary school and university is developed to allow Scottish students to benefit fully from European education mobility schemes. Noting recent developments from the Scottish Executive such as ‘A Curriculum for Excellence’ and the consultation on a ‘Strategy for Scotland’s Languages’, the article concludes with a call for a Languages Charter which would enable Scottish students to compete effectively in a globalised world where employers and researchers increasingly tell us that ‘English is not enough’.

Bridging the Gap

The present article takes forward some ideas that were highlighted in a presentation given at the 2006 Annual Conference of the Scottish Association for Language Teaching (SALT), which covered issues across the spectrum of foreign language provision, from primary school to post-graduate level. It thus offered an appropriate platform for a joint presentation on cross-sector collaboration given by the author together with Brian Prosser, Principal Teacher of Modern Languages at the Gordon Schools, Huntly.

Our introductory notes - “Paris? Brussels? Bologna? Beijing? From ‘Highers’ to ‘Socrates-Erasmus’ to ‘Erasmus Mundus’: Promoting modern languages uptake in secondary schools or how to help pupils from the best wee country in the world reach their destination” - underlined our perception that the promotion of foreign languages requires effective collaboration among language professionals across the sectors. The continuing disinclination and ill-preparedness of most young Scots, post-*Citizens of a Multilingual World*, to cross the foreign language and culture gap on entry into university was the starting point for our reflections. In choosing our presentation title, several travel metaphors sprang readily to mind. We discounted **Easyjet** except for ‘high flyers’ (!) because we know

that learning languages involves more than a brief flight journey time and long-distance flights still do not come cheap. **Eurostar** seemed more appropriate to signal the real journey time involved, and we admit we cheated a little by including Beijing to flag up the Chinese language threat to traditional European languages - one route being axed 'Beeching' style in favour of another. **Mind the Gap** is of course a reference to the familiar automated voice on boarding a tube on the London Underground but also sums up the challenge faced by many linguists in higher education (HE). Because the vast majority of new undergraduates are now without a Higher foreign language pass (or equivalent qualification), they struggle to make their "connection" for language learning at university; and so the gap continues to widen.

"Languages Work!" Conferences & EuroAwards

One serious attempt at cross-sector collaboration to celebrate the efforts and determination of those pupils who *do* proceed against the odds to take a 'Higher' language (and to encourage younger pupils to follow their example) was the "Languages Work!" 2004 project. "Languages Work!" developed out of earlier Gordon Schools' European Awareness events in Huntly and became a conference hosted at The Robert Gordon University (RGU) for 300 Aberdeenshire pupils to celebrate the notion of language learning. It was an exciting mix of presentations, discussions and interaction between media celebrities, politicians, sports personalities, business and European agency representatives, graduates, pupils, VIPs and key decision makers. The plan to highlight the explicit link between languages and technology was reflected in interactive tasks set for the day. Media interest was strong, in particular as a result of the presence of the main speaker, Berti Vogts, whose controversial role as Manager of the Scottish National Football Team attracted substantial press, radio and TV coverage.

The project, led by Brian Prosser and Murray Hill, went on to win a prestigious national (UK) EuroAward in 2004, and was recognised as a model of good practice in cross-sector collaboration for university outreach events for schools. The Standing Conference of Heads of Modern Languages in Universities (SCHML) published an account of the "Languages Work!" rationale, planning and event management on their website¹ and Learning and Teaching Scotland's online forum for modern language teachers, the MFLE (Modern Foreign Languages Environment), provides additional information². A summary of the event was featured in

¹ <http://www.schml.ac.uk/archive.html>

² <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/mfle>

a Scottish CILT Newsletter (October 2004) and on the website of its sister organisation, CILT, the National Centre for Languages.

EuroAwards are now an annual fixture in the calendar across the European Union and are regarded, rightly so, as valuable awards, raising both the profile of languages generally in society and also within individual teaching institutions. One of the main award criteria is the ability to replicate the project, and RGU linguists repeated the successful formula the following year with staff and pupils of Aberdeen City schools with "Languages Work 2005!".

The event also attracted interest and sponsorship from, among others, Total Oil company, which featured the event prominently in its in-house *Courier* magazine. Celebrity speakers included Big Brother personality Cameron Stout alongside Stewart Spence, entrepreneur and owner of the prestigious New Marcliffe Hotel, who both extolled the virtues of speaking other languages, both socially and in terms of making good business sense. A summary of this event again featured in a Scottish CILT Newsletter (March 2005) and on the CILT website.

Sadly, however, the fact remains that these "Languages Work!" conferences took place because pupil numbers taking Languages at 'Higher' grade have continued to decline in Scotland. Concern in Scotland about the crisis in foreign languages continues to be expressed from many sides, as evidenced by the conference entitled *Languages in Scotland – What's the Problem?*, which was organized by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in March 2006³.

Notwithstanding the potential success of future "Languages Work!" events to enthuse younger pupils to continue beyond Standard Grade, it is unlikely that Scotland will see a rapid increase in pupils studying languages at 'Higher' grade overnight. There are encouraging developments with the application of the new generation of digital technologies in language learning as recently demonstrated at Scottish CILT's national conference on this topic⁴ but the potentially positive impact on demand for languages in HE will take some time to feed through.

³ <http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/international/languages/index.htm>

⁴ <http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/Conferences/PastConferences/2007/Communicate.07/index.htm>

Developing the Languages Interface between Secondary Schools and Universities

While we must continue to find ways to encourage greater uptake at 'Higher' or equivalent, there is a need to connect with more pupils from the majority who drop languages after 'Standard Grade' but who are still headed for higher education. We need to get across the message that they should not regard their Standard Grade language achievement as the equivalent of 'lost luggage' and that they can 'reconnect' to languages on arrival at university.

The gradual cessation of named 'with Languages' degrees requiring a 'Higher' Language qualification at RGU's Aberdeen Business School (ABS) reflects current market forces. The introduction in 2004 of the new replacement portfolio of courses which include flexible business language options with entry level set at Standard Grade aims to create a more realistic interface. The portfolio has been expanded rapidly by programme managers to include ten courses which include a business language option.

We also need, of course, to convince students to choose the language options once they have been established within a course framework! A recent survey of ABS undergraduates' attitudes to foreign language learning and study/work abroad opportunities (November 2006) captured a strong general recognition by the student population of the value of foreign languages for career development. The same survey, however, also revealed a mismatch between perceived value and actual take-up rates of business language options and a clear need to improve both awareness and accessibility of these modules within overall ABS course provision. Without the kudos and clout of single honours degree status, then, language options have to be internally marketed assiduously by university linguists. In this regard, the entitlement for winners of the EuroAward to use the logo in internal and external University marketing publications offers serious added value.

When promoting the message externally about the changing language learning opportunities available at university it is obvious that close links with school languages departments make sense. However, it is just as important that non-language departments (e.g. business, management and tourism courses) are also kept in the picture. Pupils are smart enough to realise why language professionals will argue that languages are important, but the message becomes more significant if it is amplified through 'other subject' professionals.

We also need to do much more to help other education professionals, e.g. guidance teachers and other key non-linguists become more aware of the flexible, optional language modules which can form part of the

graduate repertoire at the different Scottish universities. For ABS this might well be the appropriate target audience for a next “Languages Work!” conference.

Changes in HE language provision also need to be communicated effectively to *potential* undergraduate applicants and the wider community, and a word of caution here is necessary. Generally speaking, it is hard to find languages described clearly in some UK university prospectuses because they have become much more image conscious and less hard-fact oriented. Similarly, a review of university websites indicates that much of the information offered on language learning opportunities is vague or misleading, much in the same way that use of the word ‘international’ in some degree titles often stretches credibility.

Engaging with Stakeholders

An obvious “Languages Work!” target group are employers, not just in Scotland but also the rest of the European Union – and beyond. Recent efforts to engage in serious dialogue with the business community, such as the 2005 *Multilingual Forum* (hosted by Scottish Enterprise and Scottish CILT), or the *Languages Make Business Sense* conference in December 2006 organised by CILT are useful but need to progress beyond initial discussions. The latter event involved supportive presentations by senior representatives from big hitters in the business community, notably international law firm *Eversheds* and *BMW*. Both companies are featured prominently in the CILT research study of language skills management in major companies, *Talking Sense* (CILT 2005). The English subsidiary of the German car manufacturer drew attention in particular to the difficulty experienced when recruiting UK citizens at various levels of the company because of their lack of German language skills. However, it remains to be seen whether these remarks will make any impact on educational policy makers.

In other words, there is little room for sentiment or complacency. Whether we like it or not, in the absence of a greater societal willingness in Scotland to embrace the value of foreign language competence, HE linguists have to demonstrate more effectively to university senior management, to course leaders from other disciplines and to other decision makers the value of integrating optional language modules into degree course design. Unless we can secure high profile public support from figures and organisations from other walks of life, the heady notion of multilingualism underpinning European competitiveness (apart from other desirable outcomes) enshrined in the Barcelona and Lisbon agreements remains a well-kept secret, and we remain ill-prepared for the 2010

convergence of Higher Education systems for which we signed up with the Bologna agreement.

Lobbying Linguists

Another “Languages Work!” target group, paradoxically, would be HE linguists themselves. Certainly, no proper effective lobbying body of Scottish academic linguists appears to have emerged to halt the decline of HE foreign languages provision, but efforts to reinvigorate the Scottish branch of the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) appear to be bearing fruit. A ‘Languages Symposium’ hosted by the Scottish Funding Council in March 2007 also provided an initial opportunity for renewed dialogue with representatives of the HE languages community. Apart from lobbying government for more realistic funding, what UCML Scotland will need to do, with the support of the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) in Scotland, is to vigorously promote cross-sector collaboration and drive the languages agenda forward, effectively becoming “language activists”.

In doing so, it will be important to get the message right. In particular, those prospective students who are *not* looking for a ‘pure’ languages course, i.e. currently the vast majority, need to know what the wider picture is in terms of how foreign language skills may impact on their future career options. We need, for example, to consider language choice and it is important to examine the logic which would see the abandonment of some traditional European languages in the expectation that young Scots would suddenly embrace Chinese where they have failed to grasp similar language learning opportunities closer to home. Realistic funding, of course, is key, if we are to square the linguistic circle by increasing overall language uptake and the *range* of foreign languages provision.

The Research Perspective: English is Not Enough

Language researchers such as David Graddol have already identified the gap which has clearly opened up. In his latest book, *English Next* (Graddol 2006) published by the British Council, he argues that it is the very success of English(es) as a world language which now makes it a baseline assumption for career success. While non-native speakers of English across the globe acquire English *and other foreign languages*, continuing complacency among English native speakers may be fatal as Neil Kinnock’s foreword warns:

Monoglot English graduates face a bleak economic future as qualified multilingual youngsters from other countries are proving to have a

competitive advantage over their British counterparts in global companies. (ibid: 4)

Clearly, HE linguists need to be careful and supportive when conveying this message, without seeming to intimidate or make non-linguist prospective undergraduates feel 'guilty'. If universities and others are willing to signal their readiness to embrace languages more, however obliquely, that is a step in the right direction, but funding constraints severely impede their ability to do so.

Internationalisation, Socrates-Erasmus & Erasmus-Mundus

The argument within a university for retaining languages may be given a boost by particular circumstances, for example, when an institution such as RGU's Aberdeen Business School articulates longer term strategic aims to position itself on the European stage. This is the case with an EQUIS application. EQUIS is a European Quality Improvement System, like a European 'Investor in People' quality badge, and it is a serious undertaking for a university business school involving an evaluation and assessment process which, typically, might succeed after seven years. An initial institutional assessment by EQUIS assessors is usually summed up by the need to 'smell the continental coffee'. The specific EQUIS indicators for accreditation suggest that foreign languages provision for undergraduates, postgraduates and staff/other members of a university community should play an important role in securing accreditation, as noted recently in a 2006 SCHML paper, *Riding the Foreign Languages Roller-Coaster*⁵. Even with an EQUIS application underway, however, short-term considerations may prevail.

Paradoxically, languages at ABS are receiving a boost from the attempts to internationalise the learning environment by encouraging students from abroad to study with us. The atmosphere at ABS is indeed truly international, with so many languages in addition to English being spoken (*but mostly outside the seminar room by incoming native speakers of those languages, rather than by Scottish students keen to interact linguistically*). Nonetheless, the impact, for example, on the learning dynamics of a Business German seminar is positive as it increases dramatically in size with additional participants, notably from new EU member state Poland. The competition has arrived.

Many UK HE linguists fear, however, that there is a danger that the dash towards 'internationalisation' for too many universities simply means one-way traffic, summed up by Hilary Footit in her LLAS paper, *What does*

⁵ <http://www.schml.ac.uk/archive.html>

"international" in HE courses mean?' (LLAS, February 2005), and contributes potentially to UK graduates being increasingly outmanoeuvred in the international employment stakes. The fact remains that traffic on the Socrates-Erasmus European Student Exchange programme is largely one-way coming in our direction from continental Europe. It is high time to invest in our own *Trains à Grandes Vitesses* if we are to connect and compete on a more equal linguistic footing, as argued recently at the *5th Conference on Languages for International Business Communication* (see Hill 2006), *The Promotion of German as a Foreign Language in Scotland* and also ICWE website⁶.

Similarly, few young Scots are currently minded to travel 'Erasmus-Mundus' style. This new EU initiative (2004-8) aims to promote the European Universities as they compete alongside other HE systems globally, and offers extremely attractive funding and mobility opportunities to both EU and non EU citizens to study at postgraduate level, typically a Masters over 1-2 years, and studying at 3 partnered universities across Europe. Recent figures from HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency), which show that numbers of Scots-born postgraduate students in universities north of the border declined from 10,205 in 1999 to 9,640 in 2004-5 at the same time as the number of foreign postgraduates rose from 6090 to 9685, reinforce concerns that Scots and UK students are missing out.

Language activism in progress

The 2006 SALT conference title '*A Conference for Excellence*' was of course inspired by the Scottish Executive's curriculum reform entitled *A Curriculum for Excellence*. Although the ACfE consultation document *Progress and Proposals* (2006) was not intended for comprehensive discussion of specific implementation challenges such as the interface problems with HE, it is important to establish the link explicitly. The *Curriculum for Excellence* website at least acknowledges in its *Building the Curriculum 1 (Languages)* section that 'learning additional languages is an important component of active international citizenship', and further acknowledges that:

through their learning of other languages, children and young people can contribute to the wider international community and Scotland's diverse society. Being able to use additional languages can enhance the contribution which young people can make in their careers, and so to economic prosperity.⁷

⁶ <http://www.sprachen-beruf.com/2007/index1.htm>

⁷ <http://www.acurriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk>

During our SALT presentation there were many travel metaphors available to inject a little black humour as we attempted to sum up the serious challenge for the current, and future, generations of Scottish graduates. "Hitting the buffers" of competition from multilingual European Union students and others should suffice here. A *proper* Languages Charter for Scottish school pupils and university students seems long overdue, with realistic funding identified for languages provision in HE an essential commitment. Otherwise, the foreign languages provision interface between secondary school and university will continue to malfunction, and in particular the loss of pioneering and innovative, vocationally relevant language teaching provision (and research) in Scottish higher education will continue. What price languages 'entitlement' then?

One final potential "Languages Work" audience has been targeted in the interim. At the 2006 SALT conference, it was proposed during the plenary session that a petition to the Scottish Parliament be submitted to reflect, as accurately as possible, the concerns of the Scottish language community and associated stakeholders. Delegates gave their overwhelming support to the petition, which was lodged with the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee on November 23 2006 for consideration in Session 3 after the elections in May 2007. The petition states:

*"Getting by" in the global marketplace without an effective and properly implemented **Foreign Languages Policy for Scotland** is no longer an option for the "best small country in the world".*

*Scottish pupils and students need to engage in integrated, progressive foreign language learning at **all** stages, from primary to higher education. Otherwise, we face being left behind increasingly by fellow European Union citizens and others when competing for jobs.*

*We, the undersigned, join with the **Scottish Association for Language Teaching (SALT)** in calling upon members of the Scottish Parliament to debate the urgent need to make a step-change in strategy and vigorously promote foreign language learning and intercultural awareness in Scotland's schools, colleges and universities.*

The SALT conference took place only a few months before the Scottish Executive draft document, *A Strategy for Scotland's Languages*, went out to consultation in February 2007. The consultation document itself noted:

We cannot overlook the wide range of European languages and cultures on our doorstep. We must seek to ensure that Scots are fully equipped with the language skills necessary for employment, study and travel throughout the European Union and beyond. We need an outward looking society with a knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it. (Scottish Executive 2007: 4)

We can only hope that the final strategy will reflect sufficiently language professionals' concerns and redress the current position for foreign languages in Scotland, which appears to be one of no strategy – or at best 'laissez-faire' in terms of the interface between secondary and higher education.

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