

A glance at languages in Further Education in the UK between 2006 and 2011

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CILT, the National Centre for Languages has just carried out its second survey into the status of languages in Further Education in 2011. A previous survey was carried out in 2006 and showed a stark decline in the opportunities for 16-19 year olds to study languages in Further Education, with the same disappointing picture emerging from all four nation states of the UK. The main aim of the 2006 survey was to discover what opportunities there were for non-specialist language -learners, i.e. those for whom languages was not their main area of study, to learn a language alongside their vocational course post 16. It was felt important at that time to assess the national picture as there was increasing anecdotal evidence showing that funding changes were leading to cuts in provision and staffing, meaning that languages were disappearing from the FE curriculum. The results of the survey reinforced this anecdotal evidence and showed that fewer than half of the FE colleges surveyed across the UK offered opportunities to learn languages in or alongside vocational courses. It also showed that one in four colleges that did offer languages had reduced its provision in recent years and that nearly half expected further decreases in learner numbers. It also showed that where such provision did exist, numbers were very small and whereas previously languages had been offered as part of a wide range of vocational courses, the offer had largely become reduced to Spanish on Travel and Tourism courses.

Unfortunately the 2011 survey shows that languages in general FE colleges have continued to decline although it should be pointed out that the response rate was low (23%) with only 98 out of a possible 419 institutions responding. Of these, only 31 responses were from general FE colleges without a Sixth Form with the bulk of responses coming from FE colleges with a Sixth Form or from Sixth Form Colleges.¹ The low response rate from general FE colleges may be indicative of the fact that so few of them are

¹ Unlike the 2006 survey, the 2011 survey also included Sixth Form Colleges and FE Colleges with Sixth forms - with the exception of Scotland who do not have a comparable Sixth Form context

now offering languages and that there is such a small number of language departments left in these institutions.

One of the most significant findings from the 2011 survey is that the bulk of language provision takes place in Sixth Forms and that programmes consist almost entirely of Advanced level courses. What this indicates is that language learning post-16 continues to focus on the more 'specialised,' academic pathway to language learning and that there is very little connection being made between the alternative pathway of language learning and skills for the world of work. Similar to the findings of 2006, where such alternative provision does exist, it is likely to be Spanish in the context of Travel and Tourism. This narrow curriculum offer perpetuates the elitist idea that languages are an academic subject which can only properly be studied as a discrete subject for those who wish to go on to university. It is at odds with the views and needs of employers, illustrated for example by the [CBI Education and Skills Survey 2011](#), which states that even a conversational ability in a language is of immense value:

'Staff who can communicate at least conversationally – combined with an understanding of the local culture – can make all the difference in the conduct of business, consolidating relationships with existing suppliers and customers and opening the way to new contacts.'

Whilst linking Spanish with Travel and Tourism would appear to be an obvious blend, learning a language on such a course is by no means an opportunity that all learners are lucky enough to experience. There was a perfect opportunity during the development of the Diploma in Travel and Tourism (launched in September 2010) to make a language a compulsory part of the Principle Learning but despite much debate and strong support from some quarters, a decision was taken not to include languages. There were a number of complex factors which led to this decision, one of the main ones being that languages would have to be assessed at the same level as the Diploma (i.e. at level 3 on a Level 3 Diploma). There were fears that learners might fail the whole qualification if they were not able to achieve the appropriate level in the language element and so the language option was dropped - despite employers expressing the view that languages are of value at *any* level in the workplace. ²

Other trends which remain the same between the 2006 and 2011 survey are that French, German and Spanish are the main languages on offer in FE and that numbers are worryingly low. It would appear that the effect of languages being no longer compulsory at Key Stage 4 has become

² CBI (2011) Building for growth: business priorities for education and skills. London, CBI.

even more stark since 2006 as it was the main reason given by teachers for the decline in demand for language courses post 16. Although there were individual colleges reporting a rise in numbers, these rises were down to actions taken in individual institutions rather than as a response to any particular policy change or trend.

Unlike 2006 the survey included questions about the status of international links and exchanges as well as teachers' needs and attitudes towards CPD. There were a good number of institutions reporting overseas trips (45 out of the 98) but again, these were mostly prevalent in Sixth Forms rather than in general FE colleges and were cultural rather than work-related. Respondents were pessimistic about their opportunities for continuing professional development, mainly because of the current funding climate. Training that focussed on getting language courses funded or making the case for languages was seen as almost as important as CPD to improve teaching and learning, indicating the worry that teachers have about getting enough learners to teach in the first instance.

The report recommends a number of initiatives to kick start a renewed interest in languages post-16, particularly in relation to vocationally-related language learning. These include a policy steer to include languages in vocational courses, better advice to learners about how languages can improve career prospects, more mobility opportunities within colleges, and more subject-specific CPD for language teachers. It is also important that languages are seen as a vital additional skill which can enhance skills and knowledge in any other subject area. This is important both in terms of improving employability skills as well as other 'softer' skills such as interpersonal communication, confidence and intercultural skills and awareness. Although the latest survey cannot be seen as a definitive study on the status of languages in FE, it nevertheless provides a worrying snapshot of the lack of opportunities for young people to learn languages post 16. Languages should be for all and languages should be for life!

