

The A Level Content Advisory Board

Mr Hardip Begol
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London, SW1P 3BT

8 July 2014

Dear Mr Begol,

WIDER ISSUES ARISING FROM THE WORK OF THE ALCAB PANEL ON A LEVELS IN MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

As you know, ALCAB has now submitted the report of the panel, which I chaired, which was invited to consider the content of new A levels in modern foreign languages and classical languages. Our report sets out its recommendations and explains the rationale for changes to the current qualification. However, our discussions inevitably ranged wider than content and this letter conveys our views on a range of related issues concerning teaching, learning and assessment in modern foreign languages (MFL).

We were working in a context that commentators have rightly described as a crisis. In recent years there has been an alarming decline in participation in England across the spectrum from GCSE, through GCE and on to higher education. Whilst AS and A level in modern languages have traditionally been viewed as amongst the more difficult subjects, in many quarters the qualifications no longer command confidence. Although there are good and inspiring teachers preparing students for the current qualifications and many students work hard and well for them, MFL A levels are sometimes viewed as dull and uninspiring and there are issues affecting confidence in the grades awarded. These unmistakable signs of obsolescence have been accompanied by a marked erosion in the very identity of modern languages. The crisis in modern language study has become a matter of national concern.

The authors of the most recent annual survey commissioned by the British Council and produced by CfBT Education Trust concerning the take-up of languages conclude with the stark warning that the 'outlook for languages post-16 [is] very bleak indeed':

The incorporation of languages as a foundation subject for all pupils at Key Stage 2 is a very welcome step, but it will neither arrest nor mitigate the crisis

at the other end of the school cycle which requires active and sustained intervention if A-levels in languages are to survive.¹

We share this view. While a reform of qualifications is now required, we believe that such a reform is on its own insufficient. It must form part of a concerted reform programme, within which modern languages is re-established as a stimulating and rewarding subject of study alongside other facilitating subjects. This entails active and sustained support for the school and, indeed, university curriculum, together with the infrastructure surrounding them. We recognise that A level is only part of the process of learning and assessment through school and university. We believe that the reform process at all stages of teaching and learning modern languages must be kept under close review and that arrangements should be made to do so, engaging all those with key interests.

As Board and Tinsley note, while the incorporation of languages as a foundation subject for all pupils at Key Stage 2 from October 2014 is a very welcome step, its success will depend on the capacity of schools to overcome a present lack of appropriately qualified teachers.² Meanwhile, the reformed GCSE and GCE qualifications in modern languages are being planned for introduction in 2016. The full impact of the three related reforms will be felt in employment and higher education only from the mid to late years of the 2020s. During the intervening years, careful monitoring of the new qualifications will be required, coupled with further active intervention as necessary.

The concurrent introduction of the reformed GCSE and GCE in 2016 places teachers, students, awarding organisations and publishers in a difficult situation. The timely provision of appropriate resources by awarding organisations and publishers must be guaranteed in order for teachers to prepare for the launch of the two qualifications. In addition, the first two groups of students to study the reformed GCE will not have had the benefit of the reformed GCSE. In these circumstances, it must be recognised that the capacity of the new GCE to enable candidates to achieve the aspirations invested in it may only be met over the medium to longer term.

Assessment issues

We are aware of concerns by teachers about the marking and grading of MFL A levels. Some teachers see the examination outcomes as unreliable and unpredictable. Schools reported examples of very able students whose insights and excellence appeared not to be recognised by the marking schemes used. For these reasons, students who are aiming for top grades to secure entry to the most competitive universities are sometimes advised not to select a modern language A level. Also, university MFL departments feel that the grades presented by undergraduate entrants are an unreliable source of information about their abilities.

We were told that the Joint Council on Qualifications (JCQ) was carrying out work on marking and grading of MFL qualifications drawing on evidence from awarding

¹ Kathryn Board and Teresa Tinsley, *Language Trends 2013-14*, p. 121.

² Board and Tinsley, p. 5.

organisations. That work had not been completed when we were required to submit our report. In our view these issues are crucial for confidence in the qualification and we would like to contribute to further thinking about how to improve the reliability of marking and enable excellence to be recognised.

We also identified issues concerning the assessment of candidates who are native speakers of the language being assessed. For example, there were reports of perceptions that native speakers were judged against higher standards in oral exams than non-native speakers. We suggest that this matter needs to be investigated. All candidates should be treated in the same way, irrespective of their background.

When monitoring the outcomes of A levels, it is important to take into account that some candidates will be native speakers of the language of study. They may have a greater likelihood of gaining high marks, but this should not have the effect of making it disproportionately difficult for non-native speakers of the language to be appropriately awarded for their achievement.

Candidates from homes with varying degrees of bilingualism are not always at an advantage and it cannot be assumed that because they have more highly developed pronunciation, other elements in their language competence are equally developed. Superficial fluency may lead to false assumptions about their linguistic advantage and unduly prejudice examiners.

Professional development of teachers

Having consulted with teachers of modern languages, we recognise the scale of change which our advice represents for them. It is essential that teachers have ongoing support and that development opportunities and teaching resources are available to them to enable them to teach the new A level courses effectively. This will need to involve providers with understanding of the thinking behind the new qualification. In our view focused development opportunities will be required over the coming decade. Within this context, modern linguists in universities must, of course, be prepared to develop their existing support activities for colleagues in schools and colleges. There is every indication that such support will be forthcoming.

Restrictions on the recruitment of modern linguists to the teaching profession

We believe that the teaching profession in modern languages should be accessible to linguists who studied a language with another discipline (e.g. English, history, film, politics) at university or who are qualified to teach another discipline while having a strong competence in a language which could be developed for teaching purposes. It is no longer the norm for students taking a degree in modern languages to study two

modern languages and many combine a language with another subject. Any requirement for teachers to offer more than one language, or only modern languages, is therefore likely to exclude a crucial group of potentially excellent teachers. At a time of teacher shortages in modern languages, this constraint exacerbates an already difficult situation. Interdisciplinarity is at the heart of modern languages, and teachers of modern languages with expertise in an additional discipline can be highly effective in generating enthusiasm for creative links between modern languages and other disciplines.

Foreign Language Assistants

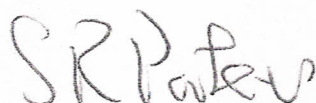
Unlike other countries in which learners of English are exposed to much English-language material outside the classroom, learners of foreign languages in the UK do not typically enjoy such exposure. Over recent decades, under budgetary pressures, the established practice of schools employing foreign language assistants to give students contact with a native speaker, often through supplementary hours, has dramatically atrophied. We believe that this trend should be reversed, and that financial regimes for schools should enable them to engage foreign language assistants. This would in turn enable more UK students of modern languages to benefit from assistantships abroad since the present scheme for the allocation of places operates on the broad notion of equivalent in- and outflows. The experience gained by these students abroad can enhance the quality of their teaching in the UK.

Online provision of learning materials

However well classroom time is used, more advanced learning in languages requires independent learning to increase exposure to the language of study and consolidate the development of the four language skills and the associated linguistic systems. In the digital age the opportunity has been transformed to enrich classroom-based learning through more independent learning at home. The learning process could be greatly facilitated by systematic use of online materials. In our view students and teachers would benefit from a dedicated website or websites which could provide a resource bank of authentic materials to support the new qualifications.

We are aware that some of these proposals have resource implications. However, our engagement with the design of new A levels has impressed on us that success in reversing the decline in take up of foreign language qualifications at school and university requires qualification reform to take place in a context where these wider issues are addressed.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'SR Parker'.

Professor Stephen Parker
Chair, ALCAB panel on modern foreign and classical languages