Ofsted subject conference report: modern foreign languages

Post-14 languages seminar

Manchester, 14–15 November 2005

Synopsis

The seminar was organised by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Ofsted, the National Centre for Languages (CILT), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust to:

- discuss the issues and challenges surrounding post-14 languages education and to come up with possible solutions
- give delegates the opportunity to consider, from one of three perspectives, three models which schools have developed for meeting the challenge of post-14 languages
- allow delegates to comment on the viability of these models and how they might be adaptable to different contexts
- discuss practical strategies for taking possible solutions forward and making them real.

Summaries of conference sessions

Day 1

On the first afternoon all 55 delegates heard Lid King, DfES's National Director for Languages, Ian Hill HMI, Ofsted's specialist advisor for MFL and David Peck, headteacher of Moseley School, Birmingham set out their perspective on the current issues surrounding post-14 languages education.

Delegates were invited by Lid King to consider the new paradigm for languages implied by the National Languages Strategy, and its relevance for making change happen.

The issues were:

- the motivation and engagement of 14 year olds in language learning
- the engagement of senior leaders in promoting and enabling post-14 language learning
- the role of developments in accreditation, such as the Languages Ladder, in engaging senior leaders
- supporting development and change in the regions.

Ian Hill presented [Learning from what works in Key Stage 4 – messages from inspection](#), which looked at findings from Ofsted's visits to nine schools this term. The focus was on factors which block and those which enable languages entitlement. Factors influencing take-up of languages at Key Stage 4 included:

- how highly parents and senior leaders value and support language learning
- effective whole school leadership and self-evaluation
- departmental organisation

- stability of staffing
- quality of teaching
- quality of language learning experience at Key Stage 3
- close links between governors and MFL departments to encourage advocacy for languages
- outreach work with partner primary schools
- visits, exchanges and languages evenings contribute to students' motivation
- the extent to which students (especially boys) perceive languages offer as being relevant.

David Peck reflected upon inclusion as a rationale for language learning and the need to:

- take a principled view of what should happen in language learning post-14
- consider how best to communicate that vision to other stakeholders
- consider the potential for broadening language study into a wider framework which would also satisfy the demands on schools to achieve higher examination grades.

Main points of the presentation included:

- the potential of the language college ethos of global citizenship and diversity. The need for skilled linguists not only for business reasons but for their particular cognitive aptitudes
- the consequent need to develop qualified language teachers
- what discourages languages provision at Key Stage 4:
  - curriculum constraints
  - perceived difficulty of getting good MFL accreditation compared with other subjects
- what can support language provision:
  - a positive message from government
  - language study viewed as inclusive: community languages seen as an advantage
  - the concept of the 'International School' with overseas visits and links.

Day 2

Delegates were grouped in regional clusters for the **morning session**. They were asked to choose one of three perspectives from which to consider three presentations. The perspectives were:

- a 'mainstream' or traditional model of post-14 language study
- a vocational perspective
- a perspective of languages for personal interest and enrichment.

The three presentations were:

i) **A model based on curriculum organisation**. Pauline Zahner from St Ivo School, presented her work on 'Junior CULP', a partnership scheme with Cambridge University on an intensive language learning experience for a group of Year 9 students.

ii) **A model based on changing curriculum content.** Judith Woodfield from Tile Hill Wood School presented her work on teaching geography through the medium of French content and language integrated learning (CLIL).

iii) **A model based on alternative forms of assessment**. Gen Mitchell from Coppenhall School.

After the presentations all groups engaged in discussion about the viability, viewed from their chosen perspective, of the model. They were also asked to discuss any adaptations necessary if they were to develop the model for their own context. They were finally asked to consider what actions they would personally need to take in order for the model to be successful, as well as what external support might be needed.

Delegates' response to all three models was very positive. They felt that the models offered good practice in emphasising the use of languages for real purposes and communication.

The 'Junior CULP' model was appreciated for its potential usefulness for accelerated language learning. The discussions focussed on:

- the practicalities and logistics of setting up and organising the project
- the feasibility of setting up such a model without the university support, for example in a language college context
- the need for more flexible curricular models for such a project to be workable in most schools
- the need for research in order to understand exactly why the project was successful
- how the project could be made more inclusive.

The CLIL model raised the following issues:

- how the benefits of more motivating and interactive teaching at Key Stage 3 could be maintained in Key Stage 4
- the need for CPD to support teachers in judging an appropriate balance of target language and English when teaching more sophisticated content
- the raising of students' expectations of language learning at Key Stage 3 and their disillusionment on meeting what was perceived as less demanding content at GCSE.

The model of alternative assessment provoked discussion on:

- how it 'played to the strengths' of students
- its potential to raise motivation in Year 9
- its value as a form of assessment which could 'sit on top' of an existing scheme of work, rather than driving it
- its close relationship with the NC
- its inclusivity: the potential to customise content to students needs and interests
- its potential links with citizenship (c.f. David Peck's presentation)
- the possible conflict of the low demand on long-term memory skills with GCSE demands
- costs and manageability of the assessment process.

The afternoon session began with a reminder of the aims of the conference. This was followed by a presentation by Adrian Ash (CILT) on the plans for the development of regional networks of support for post-14 languages and what has been achieved thus far.

In the final part of the session the common threads from the morning sessions were drawn together by Susan Wareing HMI, Lid King and Ian Hill under the heading Post-14 seminar – workshop discussions; making the paradigm real. In particular, there was a view that schools need to identify where they are now in terms of Key Stage 4 numbers (benchmarking) and what they need to do next if they are to increase the numbers of learners continuing with at least one language in Key Stage 4.

Further information

Further information on the seminar, including details of the sessions, outcomes from discussion groups and lesson ideas contributed by delegates, is available from:

www.ofsted.gov.uk
www.cilt.org.uk
www.dfes.gov.uk

For information on the National Languages Strategy
http://www.dfes.uk/languages/DSP_nationallanguages_activity.cfm

Languages for all: languages for life – A strategy for England
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy/pdf/DfESLanguagesStrategy.pdf