

A skill or a discipline? An examination of employability and the study of modern foreign languages.

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Introduction

People are fickle and are interested in languages not for cultural purposes, but rather for practical ones, and apparently there is no use trying to deceive ourselves on this point. The human race is realistic, and concerns itself only with those problems that directly touch the individual. Americans, as other people, are interested in a foreign language, because that think they may have occasion to use it either in business or in their travels. If they didn't think this they would not learn it. (Lihani 1955, p. 357).

Employability is widely cited as a key reason to study a language. Globalisation means that business is increasingly taking place across international boundaries. In order to penetrate foreign markets successfully, employers need graduates who speak the language(s) of the country in which they wish to make an impact. More sophisticated analyses speak of the intercultural competence and communication skills developed by Modern Languages (ML)¹ graduates and how these skills make them highly employable, even when the employer does not require languages. Intuitively, it would appear that ML graduates are highly employable individuals who have skills and attributes that employers demand; a demand which graduates from other subjects cannot meet. Sir Digby Jones, Former Director General of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), expressed concern about the low numbers of students studying languages: "[j]ust one in 25 students study a modern language at A-Level with very few studying those needed by business in the increasingly globalised world - such as Mandarin, Russian or Spanish." (CBI, 2005). However, this has not been the universal message of business. In Wales, a recent survey suggested that employers do not rank languages (other than English) on their list of needs (Future Skills Wales, 2003), and if they require an employee with specific language skills they will employ a native speaker of that language who possesses high linguistic competence in English. A similar message was expressed by Allan Hogarth of CBI Scotland who does not see the declining language provision in Scottish universities as "a cause for concern" (Mackinnon, 2002). The perception of English as the 'international' language is cited by employers as a reason why speaking foreign languages is not essential (Sidnick 2003, p.1).

Globalisation and national security employability rationales for the study of languages are not as self-evident as they first appear. In short, students of

¹ In this article 'Modern Languages' (ML) refers to the academic humanities discipline(s).

languages can be divided into two groups. On the one hand there are those students who study the humanities disciplines (collectively) known as Modern Languages. On the other hand are those students who have obtained language skills through study (e.g. on an Institution-Wide Language Programme), or have been brought up in a bilingual environment. Whilst the distinction is widely recognised academically, the rationale that languages make students employable has tended to focus on the ability to communicate in another language without regard for the distinct differences in experience between those who have studied ML degrees and those who have acquired competence in more than one language through other means.

This paper argues that whilst both sets of students have skills and attributes for employability, these skills and attributes are not necessarily the same. The failure to make any distinction between the two experiences with regard to employability is sending out mixed messages about the value of languages to employers. If employers perceive that the main skill of a ML graduate is to speak a language other than English, this rationalises an employer's decision to employ a native speaker of the required language who also is proficient in English, and has many other evident skills, for example a degree in business studies.

The dilemma for those seeking to develop the employability of ML undergraduates is that languages have been largely promoted as a skill (at all levels), rather than as a humanities discipline from which students will graduate with humanities type skills such as intercultural competence, independent learning, self-motivation etc. This dual skill/ discipline rationale has interesting parallels with Mathematics, the use of which is important for a whole range of disciplines including Economics, Physical Sciences, Business, Accounting etc., and their related professions. As noted by Holye et Al. (2001), school mathematics does not exist solely for the purpose of providing a foundation for the study of mathematics as a degree subject. The need to engage school pupils with the subject often leads to a curriculum that is highly, if not primarily concerned with recruiting students to an attractive course. The movement away from literature in A-level foreign languages was motivated, in part at least, by a desire to engage and attract students to A-level courses (see Holmes and Plattern, 2004). In sum there is confusion. Even the idea of a foreign language being a skill for work has been neglected; textbooks aimed at children focus on idyllic depictions of family life and survival tourism (Byram 1989, p. 17). More recently Phipps has contended that mainstream language courses have failed to be sites "...for both the communication and understanding of cultural difference". She continues, "[i]t is hardly surprising that such courses become termed as 'irrelevant'. It is because they are." (Phipps 2007, p. 35). Coleman is equally scathing of the 'languages help you get a job' mantra: "The adoption by Modern Languages of practical, work-related skills as a recruitment slogan has been well-publicised and ineffective" (Coleman, 2005).

Graduates who are UK citizens have less (or no) competition from native speakers of languages other than English in many national security fields. Whilst the notion of the national interest may not resonate strongly with applicants to higher education courses (Gallagher-Brett 2005, p. 28), non-UK nationals are not eligible for most jobs in this sector, meaning they face less competition than they would face in other employment sectors. Language needs are not static, but organisations such as Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) are able to provide intensive training in languages such as Arabic to graduates in European languages (Walker, 2005). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) welcomes ML graduates, but is unable to make languages skills a requirement, in part because the FCO assumes that there would be insufficient numbers of suitable applicants who have both languages skills and all the other skills necessary. In short they believe that it is expedient to give language training to those with other skills rather than to provide training for ML graduates to acquire other skills (see Davies, 2003).

Languages as skills in historical context

Employability and skills as a rationale for learning languages is by no means a twenty-first century argument. The language needs of government and business have been a frequent topic of the US-based *Modern Language Journal* from its inception in 1916. In the UK and USA alike, modern foreign languages were traditionally viewed as a poor relation of classics and other disciplines (Starck, 1957). Well into the twentieth century language skills were required to study a wide range of other disciplines. Geography students at Oxford University were expected to read Vidal de la Blache's *Tableau de la géographie de France* (Darby 1983, p.19). The development of research in nineteenth century Germany meant that knowledge of German was necessary for "scholars in most fields" (Starck 1957, p. 811). Becher has recently made a plea for a return to this state of affairs: "In many countries a PhD in any discipline requires reasonable proficiency in at least one foreign language, and often two" (2007, p. 54).

Modern Languages as a distinct field of study is a relatively recent formation. In 1888, Professor Sealey, a historian at the University of Cambridge, advanced the argument that the study of contemporary French literature could be as intellectually demanding as the study of Latin- the context of the report of his speech suggests that this was a fairly radical argument at the time (see McCabe, 1888). Modern languages (including English) were seen more as foundational skills than a legitimate focus for academic study in and of themselves (Oxford University did not offer Modern Languages as a full subject until 1907, following over 150 years of false starts (Oxford University, 2005)). However, this needs to be put in proper historical context; the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the arrival of a range of specialisms which would be regarded today as 'traditional disciplines'. Until the early twentieth century, Economics at Cambridge was taught as part of the Historical Tripos and the Moral Science Tripos (see Gay, 1903). Although a Regius Professorship of History was created in 1724,

history was variously taught as part of the Moral Science and Law Triposes until 1873 (see Clark, 1973).

Historically, the idea of individuals 'with language skills' as opposed to 'specialist' modern linguists has a gender dimension. Lois Gaudin, in her examination of the careers prospects of US graduates "with languages", observed: "The Help Wanted ads show that the secretarial field, especially for girls who have specialised in languages, offers many excellent positions" (Gaudin 1960, p. 199). Whilst lots of 'jobs for men' (e.g. engineers, economists) required ability in foreign languages, of 147 job adverts requiring French 118 were for women (e.g. bilingual secretaries). Although such sex discrimination is no longer legal either side of the Atlantic, it is interesting that the idea that women were seen to be language specialists whilst men needed languages as skills complementary to other fields was considered somehow natural in 1960. This gender division persists. In 2007, 72.1% of applicants to study European Languages at UK universities were women (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service 2007). I return to the gender issue in the next section.

The current confounding of 'languages as skills' and Modern Language 'specialists' can be traced to compulsory education. In part, the disconnect originates from a long-standing debate about the actual purpose of modern language study. Nineteenth century practitioners, referred to by Byram as the *anciens*, modelled their teaching of modern languages on their teaching of ancient languages. Whilst this has been (in Byram's view) justly criticised, he observes that that it should not be criticised for what it intended to do- produce speakers of the languages against an idealised standard of a well-educated native speaker. However, whilst the *modernes* appear to have retained this aim (albeit largely unstated) the arguments have focused on methods of teaching and learning languages, not the aims (Byram 1989, p. 10). As Phipps has recently contended:

One of the principal mistakes made in the field of foreign languages, in the desire to find ways of responding to the crisis in recruitment to largely literary programmes, has been to attempt to see languages as purely functionalist, utilitarian skills that will get young people good jobs at the end of their studies or schooling. The shift from written to oral modes of communication is confused with skill-deficits and functional requirements of the labour market, with no wider attention being paid to the wider shifts in social and cultural life (Phipps 2007, p. 35).

An interesting, though not widespread development in secondary schools is Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Montet and Morgan (2001, p. 4) focus their discussion on "... the teaching of a non-language subject (Geography) through a foreign language (French) as a means of achieving a higher level of proficiency in the foreign language." Whilst the aim of CLIL is the acquisition of

competence in a second language (Eurydice, 2006), whether or not the widespread use of CLIL could logically lead to an increase in numbers of students studying ML degrees is unclear. As Phipps makes clear above, the 'languages as skills' approach is being taken in response to falling recruitment to mainly literary degree programmes.

This state of affairs confounds the situation for school pupils moving from GCSE to A-level then onto university. Even A-levels "... encourage a view of the text as a functional source of information, diminishing the intellectual demands on the student and emphasising the capacity for expression in the target language over the quality of what is expressed" (Holmes and Plattern 2005, p. 211). Derham (2003) complains that students enter university Modern Languages programmes wanting only to *speak* the language. It is not only literature that they are uninterested in, but also the culture and politics. By the time they reach university, students have become used to the idea that success in studying a language equates with linguistic competence alone, thus neglecting the value of knowledge about the societies and cultures in which the language is spoken.

Messages about the employability value of languages

In the online database accompanying Gallagher-Brett's (2005) *700 Reasons for studying languages*, 181 reasons include the keyword 'employability'. These reasons have been harvested from a variety of sources including academic journal articles, interviews with sixth-formers, business reports etc. For example, ML graduates have enjoyed lower rates of unemployment six months after graduation which Marshall (2003, p.141) regards as "perhaps the most powerful tool we can use in making the case for languages", with better prospects than "...graduates in many subjects which the public mistakenly regard as better pathways to employability". However, more recent figures reporting the percentages of ML graduates getting a 'graduate-level' job demonstrates very mixed fortunes for graduates in different languages (Kingston 2003, p. 6). In terms of boosting recruitment Coleman (2004, p. 21) views the languages=employability argument as "not only ineffectual but based on false premises". Modern Languages graduates are prominently white, middle-class and have high A-level/ Higher Grade results, congruent with the profile of students who have the lowest rates of graduate unemployment and who earn the highest salaries. (Canning 2004 – see also Purcell et al 2002). High A-level results also mean that a high proportion of language graduates are eligible for graduate training schemes with blue chip companies. It is not straightforward to isolate the subject of study from other factors (e.g. school achievement, pre-university experiences, cultural capital etc).

The oft repeated argument that language graduates are highly employable may have nothing whatever to do with their choice of degree subject. Put bluntly, if you come from a good family, a good

school and a good university, you will get a good job whether or not you choose a language degree (Coleman 2004, p.21).

As noted in the previous section, Modern Languages degree programmes tend to be dominated by female students and this has implications for employability, especially in view of well-publicised attempts to encourage women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields. Although languages are viewed by the UK government as strategic subjects, there has been little in the way of policy to achieve a 'better' gender balance in ML degrees (although see DfES 2006 for a brief report of a "Lads into Languages" event held in North East England). This is in strong contrast to the efforts made to recruit more women into physical sciences and engineering (for example, see the Department for Trade and Industry funded website <http://www.setwomenresource.org.uk/>). The relationship between gender and graduate employability has been much neglected to date (Morley, 2001; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006) and work in this area is critical to understanding the employability of graduates in such a gendered discipline. Whilst the difficulties motivating boys learning languages at school have received some attention from academics, Clark and Trafford (1995, p. 315) note that there has been little attention to the gender gap in languages in comparison with science and technology subjects. In science and technology subjects there have been criticisms that equality of opportunity 'goals' place the emphasis on women to enter science without any thought to challenging the cultures of 'masculine' scientific communities in academia and other workplaces (see Cronin and Roger 1999, p.651). Similarly, it has been suggested that boys and men are alienated from a feminised culture of language learning. If the perception that girls and boys have different learning styles and respond to difference styles of teaching is true (Clark and Trafford 1995, p. 319), it follows that they will favour different academic disciplines. It would be very interesting to explore in more depth the reasons why the gender imbalance in languages has not received more policy attention, how this may relate to the perceived economic value of science and technology vis-à-vis the perceived value of languages and whether or not this implies that women make poor (or less good) decisions about what subjects to study. The Scottish Executive's aspiration for equal numbers of boys and girls studying each subject has been met with opposition from many teachers and politicians: "Overall, boys choose subjects to suit their learning style, which is more logic based, while girls are more likely to choose Modern Languages because they are more confident in expressing themselves at that stage" suggested one headteacher (Horne, 2007).

Messages about the employability value of one subject (in this case languages) cannot be made without reference to the employability messages of other subjects. Addressing the gender bias (towards men) in science not only assumes that the sciences are poorer for a lack of women, but tacitly assumes that whatever women are doing instead is of less value. Debates about gendered social factors, learning styles and biology are not only important in the classroom,

but they also impact on the future employment paths of students when they leave school or university.

The employability of ML graduates as humanities students

Although motivated by declining numbers of students opting to study languages at both school and university, the 'Languages Box' and the 'Why Study Languages' CD (Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies 2002, 2006) (correctly) relay the message that one does not need to study a ML degree to study languages in higher education. Similarly, the 'Languages Work' project, developed by CILT, the National Centre for Languages, links languages and employability together both for language specialists and non-specialists.

The distinction between Modern Languages students and other students studying languages is also blurred by the ways in which universities have restructured and reinvented themselves. Many ML departments are not only moving away from literature and other traditional areas of study, but are also providing sub-degree level courses in languages traditionally less widely-taught and becoming more embedded with English as an Additional Language teaching (Connell, 2005). The development of integrated (rather than joint honours) undergraduate programmes in languages and business is another trend (Myers, 2006). Whilst some universities still organise their Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP) through a language centre, organisationally separate from the ML department, it is increasingly common to find that the IWLP is integrated with the ML degree curriculum- ML degree students are taught alongside students of other disciplines taking a language as an option.

A skill-based promotion of languages can reinforce the stereotype language occupations of teaching, interpreting and translating, and recent initiatives in schools have attempted to overcome this (Tinsley, 2005), although 'traditional' career paths for languages graduates are equally valuable of course. Byram contends that rationales for language-learning that focus on "putative communication needs" disappear if those needs turn out to be non-existent; moreover, all motivation disappears too (Byram 1989, p. 11). As those who teach the subject in higher education have long known, ML graduates, like all humanities graduates, do a wide variety of jobs on graduation (see Allan 2006). Allan found that graduates emphasised skills and attributes such as self-motivation, defending arguments and positions, communication skills and information technology (Allan 2006, p. 17). ML graduates expressed their employability skills in much the same ways as graduates in History, Classics, English and Archaeology, and there was relatively little mention of being able to speak a foreign language as a useful employability skill. However, Allan's work supports the view that the year abroad is a 'critical moment' in employability as well as academic terms (see also Mitchell et al, 2005, Coleman 1998). Whilst they do not address employability directly, Brumfit et al (2005, p. 150) see a ML degree as "... giving learners the linguistic tools to behave as critical beings in

'other' cultures"- this is in contrast to skill-based language courses like 'Business French' or 'Holiday Spanish'.

Intercultural competence, defined by Byram et al. (2004) as "...the ability to interact in complex cultural contexts among people who embody more than one cultural identity and language", has emerged as an interdisciplinary field which links fields such as ethnography, history, language, literature, philosophy and psychology (see Crawshaw, 2005). Interculturality acknowledges that language skills alone are insufficient for an understanding of complex cultural contexts. Therefore language graduates should possess in-depth cultural insights, which will be valued by employers, rather than being 'only' functionally competent in the language. Residence abroad is a central experience in the intercultural studies paradigm, and a key site of learning. It enables the student to acquire knowledges that studying the language in a classroom does not permit. It is often the most banal aspects of everyday life that prove to be the most interesting. Phipps' (2005) work on recycling and approaches to 'rubbish' is one such example of different cultural approaches to everyday practices. Whilst the language of interculturality and intercultural competence is widely used in relation to employability (for example see Commission of the European Communities, 2003), some of its academic proponents see it in tandem with a critical pedagogy that:

refuses to entertain regimes of education that operate to serve values of employability, continued 'progress' and growth in the markets, and the so-called 'knowledge economy'. It refuses to simply allow colonising moves or the commodification of knowledge and of the bodies of the young to pass without comment. (Guilherme and Phipps 2003, p.169)

Whilst many linguists, like their counterparts in other disciplines, maintain a strong unease about the 'employability agenda', reading for a ML degree ought to be a life changing experience and a foundation for life after university. In a wider European context where graduates who are able to function in two or more languages is the norm rather than the exception, a UK graduate who wishes to compete requires much more than linguistic competence alone. Academics who promote the language skills agenda to ML degree students risk advancing the view that ML degrees equal language competence which equates with employability. When students and employers alike see language competence as the primary outcome of a ML degree, it is little wonder that an employer might choose to employ a native speaker who not only speaks the language(s) required, but also has self-evident vocational skills in business (for example). Graduates risk losing motivation if the perceived self-evident need for language skills in a globalising world outlined at the beginning of this article is not realised. The loss of motivation for language learning is not a risk to which only the school pupil is vulnerable.

Conclusions

The recruitment crisis in modern foreign languages at all levels has prompted the publication of rationales for language study, which, although sound in isolation, are confusing when aggregated. There has been little attempt to address the disconnect, not only between school and university languages, but also between humanities practitioners of ML disciplines, and those who teach languages in schools, IWLPs and adult education. Whilst these boundaries are often themselves blurred, the 'language as a skill' rationale usually seems to win out, as a common sense 'globalisation means businesses need languages' mantra. There needs to be greater research into the employability experiences of ML graduates in terms of their humanities background, rather than with an a priori assumption that foreign languages are an instrumental skill.

Vanessa Davies, writing in 2003 as Director of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Language Group, sums the situation up thus: "I, nor indeed any other employer, am still not in a position to know in a consistent way what I can expect of someone who hold a degree in or with languages from a UK university, such is the diversity of standards" (Davies 2003, p. 56). It is not simply a diversity of (academic) standards that is muddying the waters in any discussion about languages and employability- it is also the confused messages about the relationships employability has with linguistic competence and with the study of foreign literatures, cultures and societies.

Perhaps the UK's languages crisis is partly a problem of knowing what a degree in languages entails and what that means for the employability of graduates. Boosting numbers of students studying languages on IWLPs and raising standards of competence in foreign languages amongst the UK population are very important aims and there is a strong case for viewing competence in a foreign language as a basic/ instrumental skill, just like basic numeracy and literacy.

However, such aspirations must not distract us from the important issue of understanding what a degree in Modern Languages entails and promoting the values and virtues of the study of literatures, cultures, politics and societies of other countries. The humanities discipline of Modern Languages must not be sacrificed in the hope of yielding uncertain gains in promoting (or even enforcing) foreign languages as a utilitarian skill for all. Language competence is just one outcome of a ML degree and other skills such as intercultural competence, critical thinking and self-motivation are as equally important. Moreover, graduates with an intensive knowledge of the cultures and societies of specific countries and experience of living and working overseas develop attributes for employability that language skills alone cannot provide.

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